

# ANNABELLE WINTERS

ROMANCE LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN



# INTERROGATING

*Indian*

A DARKWATER ROMANCE

**INTERROGATING INDIA**

**ANNABELLE WINTERS**



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*Cover Design by S. Lee*

# INTERROGATING INDIA

ANNABELLE WINTERS



**46 MILES FROM MUMBAI**  
**CITY.**

**REPUBLIC OF INDIA.**

Mike “Ice” Wagner tapped the Jeep’s brakes, took off his sunglasses, and winced. The sun sat low in the sky but still shone bright and hot, its evening rays glinting off the corrugated metal roof of the CIA safe-house.

The safe-house was a concrete rectangular structure, roughly the size and shape of a small bunker but with real windows instead of slits for machine-gun barrels. It stood halfway down a crowded dirty street in a distant suburb of Mumbai, a bustling metropolis of thirty million souls, give or take twenty million because nobody had ever gotten an accurate population count.

Ice rubbed his jaw and gazed at the blacked-out, metal-barred safe-house windows with his naked eyes, then exhaled

on his Wayfarer sunglasses, wiped the lenses carefully with an alcohol-soaked swab, and put the shades back on.

It had been a long time since Ice had last been outside a CIA safe-house in some distant land, preparing to scare the piss out of a prisoner, terrify the crap out of a captive.

Get them to talk.

To reveal their secrets in return for what was sometimes nothing more than a quick death rather than the painful end the bastards would meet at the hands of the comrades whose trust they'd betrayed.

Betrayed because Ice had broken them.

He could do it hard or soft, go brutal or gentle, become their best friend or their worst nightmare. There was no perfect interrogation technique, Ice had learned.

It was all about the two people involved.

One doing the asking.

The other doing the telling.

It was about their relationship.

It was intimate, delicate, personal as hell, deep as fuck.

Especially when the stakes were this damn high.

Just the way Ice liked it.

Hell yeah, it was good to be back in the field.

Back in the game.

Back in the shadows.

The shadows were home to Delta men like Ice. Darkness was their natural environment. Along with the Navy SEALs, the Army's Delta Force was the elite Special Operations branch of the U.S. military—and by that measure the best in the world at what they did.

Except Ice wasn't here on Delta business. Hell, it had been two years since he'd last been on Delta business. Two years since he'd been a Delta.

He and his brother Jack had made the tough choice to take early retirement so they could be with Mom and Dad during those savage final years when their parents were both suffering.

Suffering for their sins.

Just like maybe Ice was destined to do for his own sins.

Because something about this Darkwater business made him uneasy in his gut, unsettled in his skin, edgy in the head.

Unusual for a man who'd earned the nickname Ice for being the coolest motherfucker when it counted.

Yeah, this felt different.

Maybe because it *was* different.

Ice had used his interrogation techniques on hundreds of poor saps who'd coughed up their secrets within hours of being alone in a room with him.

But this was the first time Ice had been asked to break a woman.

And that could be a problem.

A big fucking problem.

Ice watched the safe-house from a distance for another few minutes, then started the Jeep's engine and slowly maneuvered down the potholed road. On either side were unpainted two-story buildings of raw concrete. Retail on street level with tiny apartments above for the proprietors and their families, all of whom worked at the little shops that sold everything from tins of cow-milk *ghee* to swaths of *saree* fabric to cheap plastic toys that came in by the truckload from China, which shared a large border with India towards the north.

And China was part of the reason Ice was here.



India and China had already fought three wars, and for the last several decades had been squabbling over land in the borderland state of Kashmir—a savagely beautiful expanse of mountains and valleys perched at the northernmost tip of India.

Beautiful land, but also disputed land, with India, Pakistan, and China each occupying about a third of Kashmir—though precisely *which* third was a matter of contention.

India, Pakistan, and China were all nuclear powers, which made Kashmir one of the world's powder kegs, a real hotspot that both the CIA and the Department of Defense kept close tabs on—which in CIA and DOD talk meant they had people on the ground watching for any dangerous developments.

And the woman in that safe-house might be one hell of a dangerous development.

Except CIA Director Martin Kaiser didn't want CIA or DOD people handling this particular matter, handling this particular woman.

So he'd kicked it down to his former brother-in-arms, ex-CIA legend John Benson.

Who just happened to be Ice's boss at Darkwater.

And so Ice was back out in the field, in the middle of Mumbai, on a mission that was so secret even he didn't know exactly what the fuck was going on yet.

He sighed, took off his shades again, rubbed his green eyes, then glanced at the sleek black Darkwater phone sitting silently on the empty seat beside him.

As if on cue it lit up and buzzed.

An oversized selfie of a tattooed and shirtless Jack Wagner flashing a cocky grin popped up on the screen. Ice sighed and shook his head, tapped the phone and put the call on speaker.

“Can you please change that damn profile picture?” Ice snapped. “It gets plastered all over my phone when you call. Someone sees that and they're going to wonder about the company I keep.”

“It'll elevate your status in life, big brother,” came Jack's crackling voice through the loudspeaker. “Though it'll probably kill your chances if you're trying to get laid and the woman sees it. She'll never be satisfied with a clean-cut choirboy like you after seeing what she could have had if she'd picked the right brother. Maybe if you got some ink on those overdeveloped muscles you might have better luck with the nerdy librarian-type women you like to fuck. What do you

say, bro? Should I hook up an appointment with my tattoo guy in Brooklyn?”

“What do you want, Jack?” Ice stayed calm, not taking the bait. Jack treated his body like a canvas for tattoo artists, but Ice didn’t have a splash of ink on his own skin.

Wasn’t his style, never would be.

He was all business, all the damn time.

The mirror opposite of his kid brother Jack.

Especially when it came to their taste in women.

Jack liked the party-girls who could dance all night—preferably on his cock. Ice would much rather stay in with his woman, draw the blinds to shut out the world, bring her into his own world with just whispered words and carefully chosen commands.

And yeah, Ice liked a woman with a sharp head on her shoulders, not just nice boobs beneath them. So fucking what? Jack made it sound like there was something undesirable about a woman who could hold her own in an argument, stand her ground in a debate.

Hell, to Ice that was the best part of the game.

Because nothing felt as good as winning that sort of game.

Dominating that sort of woman.

A girl who could stand her ground.

A woman who could hold her own.

Give as good as she could take.

Snarl and spit before Ice made her submit.

Now Ice's mind whipped back to the photograph Benson had given him of the woman waiting inside that safe-house.

Waiting for him—even though she wouldn't know he was coming for her, wouldn't know what hit her when he got there and did his work.

His cock moved and he swallowed hard. He knew there were no rules in a safe-house outside the United States. That was the whole point of using safe-houses in foreign countries.

Plausible deniability wasn't just for politicians. In fact CIA owned the concept ever since that National Security Memorandum from 1948 authorized the Agency to break international law so long as the U.S. government could "plausibly deny" involvement. It was effectively *carte blanche* for the Company, hence the safe-houses all over the world where the only rules were the ones written by the interrogator.

Because CIA had long since figured out that if you wanted to fight terror, then you needed to put your people in positions where they could use every damn weapon available.

You needed to fight terror by inflicting fear, by making it clear there were no American laws protecting your ass, no American media ready to tell your sob-story.

Especially if you were interrogating an American citizen.

“Is it a woman?” came Jack’s voice.

Ice frowned as he cleared his head and pulled up outside the safe-house, parking next to an old model Range Rover, white and beat-up with badly scuffed local license plates.

He glanced at the blacked-out windows of the building. It was just black latex paint on frosted glass sliding windows that were probably bolted shut. A noisy air-conditioning unit sticking out the side of the building was the only sign of life.

Of course, Ice would kill the air-conditioning.

Because the point was to make the woman sweat.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ice sighed into the phone.

“Your first Darkwater mission. Is it a woman?”

Ice sighed again, then swiped Jack's face off his phone and hung up on his kid brother without another word. He checked his messages to see if Benson had sent anything new over. All he'd gotten so far was the woman's basic file. Everything else he knew about the woman was just from the one meeting with Benson back in Upstate New York.

Not that Ice needed much more. He had the basics, and that was enough to get under her skin, burrow into her brain, crack her code and make her spill her dirty secrets.

Ice reached into the back seat and grabbed his duffel, stuffed it under the front passenger seat. He'd come here straight from the airport. Civilian flight, so no weapons. No easy access to weapons either. India wasn't a gun-friendly nation, and there were no U.S. military bases or official CIA stations in the country. U.S. Embassies would have small armories, but Benson and Kaiser wanted this whole thing to happen without any U.S. government knowledge, so Embassies were off limits.

Which meant all Ice had were his hands and his wits.

Should be more than enough.

It was just one woman.



The phone buzzed again.

It was Jack calling back, probably pissed off that Ice had hung up on him. Ice considered ignoring the call, but he was a few minutes early and he sure as hell didn't want Jack blowing up his phone later when he was in the middle of dealing with this woman.

Because a good interrogation had to be carefully curated.

Meticulously maneuvered.

Perfectly played.

That was Ice's superpower. He knew how to set the baseline with an interrogation target. He'd picked up the fundamentals when he joined the Army after West Point and signed up with the Military Police division. Then Delta recruited him after Ice showed his chops by hunting down one of their own men who'd gone bad and killed a working girl outside Fort Benning.

Ice had broken that hard-ass Delta guy in a marathon fourteen-hour interrogation, getting a full confession out of the guy, making it go down clean and quiet so the proud Delta Company didn't look too bad. The guy ended up hanging himself in his cell at Leavenworth, which didn't bother Ice one

damn bit. If anything, the fucker got off easy for killing that girl.

But breaking that Delta guy got Ice a new reputation and a new gig.

And the Delta trainers took Ice's interrogation skills to the next level.

Showed him how to *really* get someone to open up.

Open up wide.

So he could get all the way inside.

Ice was about to pop open the Jeep door but the damn phone kept buzzing. He answered just to get rid of Jack's annoying grin from the phone screen.

"Can't talk about it and you know that," Ice barked. Then, knowing that Jack would happily talk about himself until his battery died, Ice flipped the script. "What about you? What's Benson got you doing for Darkwater?"

"We're all hunting this guy Diego Vargas." Jack exhaled noisily, taking heavy breaths, in deep and out hard, with grunts interspersed. "He's still on the loose, gunning for Senator Robinson and Princess Delilah. Benson thinks Diego wants to

take them out before the Presidential Primaries, before Robinson becomes the nominee.”

“You hunting for Diego at the gym?” Ice grinned when he heard the telltale *clang* of the deadlift plates as Jack set the weights down hard. “I doubt he’s there. Not even a hardened torture artist like Diego could stand the smell of your armpits when you lift heavy.”

“Your sense of humor is getting worse with age,” Jack panted into the phone. He grunted, straining to lift what Ice figured was close to five hundred pounds on the deadlift. “Scratch that. You were always about as funny as a cancer diagnosis.”

Ice stiffened at the jab. It had been almost a year since Mom had died, going on seven months since Dad joined her in the great beyond. Cancer had taken them both, and it hadn’t been easy to watch it happen.

Especially because Mom and Dad had both refused treatment, choosing instead to follow some hokey new-age idea that you could simply “think” away the cancer, “desire” away the disease, use “intention” like a scalpel to purge yourself of the “bad vibrations” that were messing up your body.

Bullshit.

Mom and Dad were full of it.

Full of ideas that had no basis in science.

Beliefs that had no grounding in reality.

And they died because of those beliefs.

Holding on to those bullshit ideas until their last wheezing breaths, insisting that it was fate for them to end up this way, destiny for them to die like that.

Leaving Jack and Ice with a family album of memories poisoned by pain, stained with suffering, dark with despair.

But what still tore Ice up inside was knowing that modern medicine could have eased their pain and extended their lives, maybe even beaten the cancer into remission, kicked its ass and sent it back to hell where it damn well belonged.

Though in a way the cancer had brought Ice back home, hadn't it? Forced him to forgive Mom and Dad for what they'd put him through that Thanksgiving day after his first deployment as a Delta, when he'd returned home after his first kill.

Though he hadn't really forgiven them, Ice knew inside that dark section of his heart where he'd buried the memories

of that Thanksgiving, that chilly November Thursday when he'd turned his back on Mom and Dad, stormed out of the house, out of their lives, swore never to return.

And then was pulled back by that disease.

The cancer which some part of Ice blamed himself for causing.

Even though science said that was impossible.

Emotions didn't cause disease. No damn way.

"Damn it," came Jack's voice followed by a tremendous *clang* of metal weight-plates falling on the concrete floor of their garage-gym not far from the West Point campus.

They still had the old house, though Ice wanted to get rid of it, sell it for any damn price at which they could find a quick buyer.

Too many memories.

Too much baggage.

It was time to let go.

Time to move on.

"Try not to kill yourself with those weights, all right?" Ice said softly, listening to the sounds of Jack slamming the

weight-plates back onto the bar. “Look, I have to go. Good luck with the hunt for Diego.”

“Yeah, you too,” came Jack’s somewhat distracted voice through the speaker. Another grunt, then Jack moved closer to the phone. “Wait, listen. I get that Benson wants you to stay silent about the mission. But at least tell me if there’s a woman involved.”

“Bye, Jack.”

“Come on, man. You’ve seen the other Darkwater guys with their wives, you’ve heard about how those other missions went down for them. And the names, Ice. You’ve got to admit, there’s something weird about how those names line up. Hell, Mom and Dad would have gone ape-shit over how the Darkwater names match. Especially if they saw how *our* names fit in. Hogan was the last guy. Now it’s *Ice* and *Jack*. You *know* Mom and Dad would have loved that shit.” He chuckled. “Remember that poem they made up when we were kids?” Jack’s voice took on a sing-song tone. “No such thing as a lucky break. No such thing as a meaningless mistake. No such thing as misfortune or luck. So just follow your heart and you’ll never be stuck.” Jack howled out a laugh. “That was it. Still remember every word, and I bet you do too. Now tell me



if the name lines up, Ice. You know Mom and Dad would say it's a sign from the universe."

"Here's a sign from the universe." Ice tapped his phone and hung up on his brother for the second time today and probably the millionth time in their lives.

Ice was just three years older, but sometimes it felt like Jack was still a kid. Especially when he talked like a head-in-the-clouds idiot, spouting nonsense of the kind Mom and Dad subscribed to, bullshit ideas that belonged in children's fairy tales.

Not that either of them had read many fairy tales growing up. They'd been too busy playing in the dark woods past their backyard in Upstate New York, not far from the Hudson River. As kids they'd follow the river to the bend, from where they could see the grand old buildings of West Point. They'd talk about how they were going to go there someday, become soldiers in the U.S. Army, grow up to be action heroes, superheroes, kicking ass and taking names, hunting enemies and destroying villains.

Of course, Mom and Dad had solidly opposed any sort of violence. They wouldn't even kill mosquitoes. So it wasn't an easy conversation when Ice informed them he'd been accepted

to West Point and he was going to join the Army. It was only when Ice explained that the whole point of having a strong military was to *prevent* violence that his hippie-hearted parents finally relented.

Not that they could have stopped Ice anyway. He wasn't a hothead like Jack, but Ice was equally bullheaded, an absolute lock to do whatever he fixed his mind on, no matter what anyone said, no matter what anyone did, no matter what anyone thought.

But now Ice wasn't sure what to think as he stepped out of the Jeep and closed the door quietly. His instructions had been brief. He was to meet the local CIA asset Edwin Moses at this safe-house. Moses should already have brought the girl here.

Moses was just an asset, not officially CIA. He'd married an Indian woman and had been living in Mumbai as a U.S. expat for decades. He was mostly eyes and ears, an enabler rather than a doer. Benson seemed to trust him well enough, assured Ice that Moses would give him a weapon and answer any lingering questions about the mission.

And there were a lot of lingering questions.

Benson had been frustratingly secretive from the beginning. Clearly the wily old CIA dog didn't want to brief

Ice on all the details while still in America. Ice was new to Darkwater, and Benson was covering his bases, making sure that Ice didn't know enough to say anything to Jack or the other Darkwater guys.

All Benson had said was that it was an internal CIA problem which Director Martin Kaiser did not want handled by the CIA.

It involved a woman, a low-ranking CIA analyst assigned as an attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Mumbai, India.

Her name was O'Donnell.

India O'Donnell.

"India like the country?" Ice had asked when he and Benson met for an early breakfast at Carson's Diner on the Hudson River in Rye, New York.

"India like the character," Benson had said as he sliced his bacon and dipped it into some very orange egg-yolk before wolfing it down and looking up with a half-grin. "Haven't you read *Gone with the Wind*?"

Ice had grunted as he finished his bacon—which looked a bit rare but seemed salty enough to kill any microbes. He drained his coffee, tapped the spoon against the rim of the

empty cup and nodded at the waitress, who was watching him from the corner of her eye—perhaps because it was six in the morning and he was wearing his sunglasses indoors like either a movie star or a serial killer.

“But India Wilkes is a relatively minor character in *Gone with the Wind*, and since India O’Donnell *is* half-Indian, you get points for the connection to the country,” Benson had continued. “India’s mother was born in New Delhi, moved to the U.S. for law school, got knocked up by the Dean of the school in her third year, then died during childbirth because she insisted on delivering the baby at home without medical help. The heartbroken Dean named the kid India, put baby India up for adoption, then promptly drowned himself in Chesapeake Bay.”

Ice had taken off his sunglasses so as not to scare the waitress, and he’d stared at Benson as the former CIA man rattled off India O’Donnell’s tragic history like it was a fake biography manufactured by some overly enthusiastic CIA intern trying to come up with a clever cover story for a spy.

“You messing with me, Benson?” Ice had inquired with a raised eyebrow. “Like my brother says, I don’t have a sense of

humor, so if that's a joke I'm supposed to get, tell me so I can laugh."

Benson had chuckled, reached for his coffee, raised it to his lips, sipped and then shrugged.

"I agree it sounds made up, but it's all true. You'll have her basic CIA personnel file on your phone in a few hours once Kaiser gets it to me." Benson took another sip of coffee, then put the cup down and picked up his water-glass. "Her background is almost comically tragic, but that describes half the damn CIA. You do know that the Company actively seeks out folks like her. Orphans are a great start. People scarred and damaged from birth. And O'Donnell has mental chops to complement those psychic scars. Add to it that she could pass for not just Indian but Hispanic or Mediterranean or Arab, and you've got a textbook CIA recruit." Benson had grinned. "Smart like cancer, dedicated like a disease, damaged from the inside out."

Ice's normally cool blood had risen up along his neck at the pointed mention of *cancer*. He'd looked dead ahead into Benson's gray wolf-eyes, wondering if Benson was itching to get his face bashed in over breakfast.

Obviously Benson was fucking with him, pushing his buttons, testing Ice to see if he really was as cool as his nickname promised. Why else would he use words like *cancer* and *disease*, words intended to trigger Ice into losing his cool, showing that perhaps he wasn't ready for this mission, maybe not ready for Darkwater at all.

Which would have been all right with Ice. He'd only joined Darkwater to keep an eye on Jack, who'd been dead-set on doing it ever since that spectacle with the movie star Diana Jackson down in Somalia had sent rumors around the Special Forces community about this new outfit headed up by the legendary John Benson.

Ice had heard the rumors, and he hadn't liked what he heard.

Especially that shit about the names all lining up alphabetically.

To him that wasn't a sign from the damn universe but more likely an indication that Benson was off the rails—just like some other rumors that had also been going around about the former CIA man.

But hopefully Benson recruiting guys with names in sequence was just a harmless case of OCD or some other



psychological tic. Those CIA guys liked to get cute when naming missions or coming up with codenames. Wouldn't be too hard to recruit guys in alphabetical order if you were a seriously-connected obsessive-compulsive wacko like Benson was rumored to be.

Easily explainable.

Hopefully harmless.

But you never knew with these sketchy Company guys who'd been operating in the dark so long they started seeing ghosts in the shadows, patterns in the chaos, meaning in those patterns.

So Ice had decided that if he couldn't stop Jack from joining Darkwater, he was going to tag along and ride shotgun for his kid brother.

"So O'Donnell is CIA," Ice had confirmed after ignoring Benson's pointed word-choices about disease and damage.

"I'll be working with her?"

"No, you'll be working *on* her."

Ice had blinked twice, almost putting his shades back on to hide what his eyes might reveal. Benson was studying his eyes like he was watching for something, but Ice had a poker face

that could fool his own mother. He didn't let the dark chill running down his spine show up in his dead-cool eyes.

Because Ice knew what working *on* someone meant.

Especially when a CIA man was giving the orders.

Company guys like Benson and Kaiser were in their own league when it came to crossing ethical lines, stomping on moral rights, ignoring not just basic human decency but even the U.S. Constitution if that's what it took.

Delta Force was part of the military, bound by codes of conduct, restricted by international conventions.

But CIA had always played by a different set of rules.

And man, had the gloves come off in this new world of terrorism and random acts of mass violence.

Ice knew because he'd seen it working on CIA-run missions while still with Delta Force.

Seen it and lived it.

"O'Donnell is dirty?" Ice had asked softly. "You know that for sure? Or is that what you need me to figure out?"

Benson hadn't answered, instead gesturing to the waitress for the check. He'd paid in cash, leaving a tip larger than the

bill.

They'd walked to their cars silently, Benson stopping in front of his gray Crown Victoria and turning for what ended up being his final words before Ice was on his way to Newark Airport to catch an Air India seventeen-hour nonstop direct to Mumbai International.

“The last time the United States convicted someone for treason was in the 1950s,” Benson had said softly as the sun bathed them in golden light. “And that isn't because we're so awesome that nobody has wanted to switch sides in the last eight decades. We just handle those cases outside the courtroom now. You know that as well as anyone. That's why I picked you. That's why Kaiser and I are sending you to O'Donnell instead of bringing her back to America.”

Ice had stood silent in the morning sun and slowly put his shades back on.

He knew exactly what Benson was saying.

Knew exactly what the mission would become if O'Donnell admitted to betraying her country.

But what Ice didn't exactly know was if he'd be able to finish that kind of mission with a woman.

He'd sent his share of souls to hell back in the Deltas, but Ice had never put down a woman.

And a part of him wasn't sure he could.

Wasn't sure he would.

But there was no backing out, Ice had known as he stared into the sun rising over the Hudson River. He'd worry about crossing that bridge when he came to it.

"She's been selling American secrets to the Chinese, the Pakistanis, and the Indians," Benson had informed him matter-of-factly, though there was a strange sparkle in his eyes as he spoke. "Though *selling* might not be the right word. Her financials are clean as a whistle."

"So she's not doing it for money but for principle?" Ice's blood rose. "Because she thinks it's the *right* thing to do?"

Benson had shrugged, that strange light still shining in his eyes, his lips twitching like he was trying to hold back a smile.

"Don't know exactly. That's where you come in," Benson had said cheerfully. "We *do* know she's been sending them stuff she couldn't have gotten without high-level clearance within the CIA. We tried tracking it in the system, but there's no electronic trail to follow. Which means there's someone

else involved—someone who can get that level of access without leaving a trail. Someone pretty damn high up the CIA chain of command.”

Ice had blinked behind his shades. “That’s why Kaiser doesn’t want any CIA folk handling this. Doesn’t want this other guy alerted that O’Donnell’s been blown. We need to break her to get to him.”

Benson had nodded. Then he reached into his car and pulled out a waterproof plastic bag with an American passport, an International Driver’s License, an American Express Black Card, and a sleek black phone with no logo on it. He handed the package to Ice, then got into his Crown Vic and started up the Ford’s V8 engine.

“That’s your alias. Passport already has an Indian tourist visa stamped. Amex card will get you cash and credit anywhere in the world and has no limit. The phone will work on any cell network worldwide and also has a satellite receiver in case you’re in the middle of nowhere.” Benson had waited a beat, then put the car into gear and started to back out of his parking spot. “Mumbai safe-house location is on your phone. Edwin Moses is the CIA asset on the ground. He’s been

instructed to bring O'Donnell to the safe-house. You take over from there.”

That was all Benson gave him, and now, twenty-three hours after roaring out of that diner's parking lot in his souped-up Jeep Liberty, Ice was outside that Mumbai safe-house watching Edwin Moses emerge from behind the beat-up metal door.

Moses was a short, stocky man with a receding crop of red hair and a very ruddy face that didn't seem to have tanned much after decades of exposure to the brutal Mumbai sun. He glanced left and right before hurrying out of the doorway towards where Ice stood near his Jeep.

Moses didn't introduce himself or offer a handshake. Instead he unlocked his Range Rover with a large old-fashioned key, glancing at Ice over his shoulder before getting in. “She's all yours. I was never here.”

Ice frowned, that chill racing up his backbone again. Benson had implied Moses would have more to offer than a hasty retreat. Hell, Ice had no idea what to expect inside that safe-house.

Was O'Donnell tied to a chair, hanging by her feet from a hook, sprawled on a medieval torture rack, nailed to a damn



cross?

Ice didn't like going in blind. He needed to set the frame in an interrogation, make it clear he was in charge. This woman was an analyst, not an assassin, but she was still CIA. She'd been trained at the Farm and would know how to handle herself. Ice needed to know what state Moses had left her in. A damn weapon might come in handy too.

So Ice strode over to the Range Rover and grabbed the driver's side door so Moses couldn't close it. "Benson said you've got a weapon for me. And some information."

Moses stared like Ice was speaking Swahili. The car door was half open, and Ice picked up the hint of a woman's fragrance from the interior. It meant O'Donnell had driven over with Moses, had been sitting up front with him. She'd showered and groomed herself before the trip. There were no restraints in the car, no signs of a struggle.

Therefore O'Donnell hadn't been a prisoner on the way out here.

Moses frowned deep now, making his face look jowly. "Benson? *John* Benson? That's who Kaiser got to clean this up for him? Fuck, now I *know* I don't want to be here. Don't want anything to do with that snake."

Ice took a breath. So Benson had been lying. Moses didn't even know Benson was involved.

Hell, maybe even *Kaiser* didn't know Benson was involved, Ice suddenly thought.

Now his throat tightened from the suspicion that he was being played by that coyote Benson. This was Ice's first Darkwater mission, but he and Jack had gotten the inside scoop during Hogan's bachelor party down in New Jersey.

Ax and Bruiser and the guys had warned Ice and Jack that Benson lied like it came natural as breathing to him, like he couldn't help himself.

Ice said nothing. Waited for Moses to get nervous and keep talking.

Moses blinked three times, clawed at his scraggly red hair. His brow shone with a thin veneer of perspiration. It was warm outside, but the sweat wasn't from the weather.

"Look," said Moses. "I get an encrypted message direct from Kaiser a day ago. He says to contact this woman O'Donnell who's with the U.S. Embassy in Mumbai. Says she's the CIA attaché and I should bring her out to the safe-house on some pretext of meeting an informant or some crap

like that. He said someone would come out to take over. That's it. That's all I know, all I fucking *want* to know. This is already too heavy for me, all right? If Kaiser's contacting me direct, then I know something sketchy is going on, and I want no part of it. I've done what he asked, now I'm out of here. Please let go of the door, sir."

"Fine. Give me your weapon and you can go."

Moses snorted. "Go to hell. I'm not official CIA, and I don't get all that fancy equipment. All I have is this one shitty handgun, and that took me like a year to get. This isn't Texas, you know. Can't just stroll into a 7-11 and pick up a dozen doughnuts and a Glock."

Ice looked him dead on in the eyes. Moses paled like he was seriously considering the possibility of his own throat being slit and his body left out for the local stray dogs.

Finally Moses cracked. He leaned forward with a sigh, reached around to the back of his belt. He pulled out a handgun and offered it to Ice. It was a Russian-made Steyr 9mm.

Ice examined the weapon. It hadn't been cleaned in years. Probably hadn't been fired in even longer. Hell, it was more

likely to blow up in his damn face than hit a target at anything more than point-blank range.

Ice handed the gun back to Moses.

Moses looked at him funny. “You sure? Don’t know what your objective with this O’Donnell woman is, but you might need it. After all, she’s packing a standard-issue Glock 19. Shoulder holster.”

Ice frowned, rubbed his jaw. He’d shaved before breakfast with Benson, but now it was a day later and he had some stubble. “You didn’t disarm her before putting her in there?”

“Nobody said shit about disarming anyone,” Moses snapped. “Don’t even know why Kaiser wanted me to bring her here. All he said was to keep it quiet, to make sure nobody in the Embassy knew about this.”

Now Ice stepped away from the car door, rubbed the back of his head, straightened his shades, exhaled hard. He thought for a long moment, considered the situation.

Benson was obviously up to something sketchy, but although the rest of the Darkwater guys had warned Ice about Benson’s games, they’d also made it damn clear the guy could be trusted implicitly, that the secret to working with Benson

was to roll with the punches, flow with the current, go with the grain.

It had sounded borderline hokey to Ice, but at the same time he sort of understood. It wasn't a logical kind of understanding, though. More instinctual, gut feeling instead of cold calculation.

Still, Ice did the cold calculation just to be sure he was making the right choice.

And the math was pretty damn simple.

He had two options.

Go forward or turn back.

Call Benson and quit or go forth and conquer.

Ice rubbed the back of his neck again.

Then he stepped away from Moses, let the man close his car door, then watched Moses back the Range Rover out into the dirty street and gun the engine like he was desperate to end his role in this story.

Now Ice stood alone outside that safe-house, the half-open metal door grinning at him like a hyena, beckoning him like a trap, inviting him to step past the threshold and face what lay inside, what lay beyond, what lay within.

A trained, armed, potentially treacherous, probably dangerous CIA agent who might have every incentive to blow his damn head off if Ice walked in there like an action hero.

But still that instinct urged him onwards.

That instinct which felt like something new to Ice, a different sort of gut-feel from the usual battlefield sixth sense that all Special Forces men were blessed with.

Yeah, this instinct was different, and if Ice were truly his parents' son he might call that instinct the feeling of fate, the drag of destiny, the urging of the universe to take that step forward, to open that door, cross that threshold, face what was waiting within, waiting beyond, waiting inside.

Inside the safe-house Indy O'Donnell looked at her watch. She had been waiting six minutes and thirty-eight seconds for Moses to return. She was slightly jumpy, but mostly because it was exciting to be out in the field on what felt like a real assignment, a welcome change from the staid analytical and political work she did for Langley under her cover at the Mumbai Embassy.

Indy surveyed the unpainted concrete walls of the cramped safe-house. The place was bare like Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard. A steel table and steel chairs for furniture. Naked LED bulbs behind metal cages on every wall, casting the interior in harsh white light that made her temples throb. The windows were frosted glass painted black and bolted shut.

She didn't think they were bulletproof. This wasn't a war zone.

A lonely metal cabinet stood against the back wall. It was unlocked, but Indy had no desire to peek inside. Judging by the dust and rodent-pellets on the unevenly tiled floor, this place was mostly a safe-house for cockroaches and rats rather than humans.

Not surprising, Indy thought as she paced the tiled floor in her canvas Vans lace-ups. She couldn't imagine that guy Moses needing to use this place much. The Indians and the Americans were mostly on good terms. Not good enough for the Indians to allow an official CIA field station in their country, but India was an important ally because of its shared border with China.

Indy took a long breath, smiling as she exhaled the musty air that was just about tolerable thanks to the wheezing air-conditioner on the side wall. Everything about this city was gritty and dirty, and Indy loved it.

She loved being in this part of the world, had literally danced around her Arlington apartment when Langley had approved her application to be stationed in her namesake country of India.

She'd been drawn to this land since the very beginning. At first she'd assumed it was because of her name and her half-ethnicity. But the truth was she'd never really been called the name her father had supposedly given her before he died. Her adoptive parents had called her Indy, like maybe they didn't love her given name but didn't want to change it out of respect for a dead man's wish.



So she'd been Indy, not India.

Indy in her thoughts.

Indy in her dreams.

And then when the dream became joining the CIA, *Indy O'Donnell* seemed like a nice neutral name for a secret agent.

Noncommittal and asexual.

Sort of like her.

Because how long had it been since a man had touched her?

Yeah, exactly, Indy thought stiffly as she paced the safe-house. She loved being here in Mumbai, but there was still a vast distance between her and the common man on the street. Most people spoke at least some English, but language was still a problem.

So was her job at the Embassy.

Her job title was just "local political analyst." The CIA made up cryptic titles like that for all their Embassy liaisons in countries where official CIA presence was unwelcome.

Though of course, the Indians weren't dumb. They knew CIA was everywhere. It was more of a don't-ask-don't-tell

game than any serious deception.

But finally she was on a serious operation, Indy thought as that nervous energy made her toes curl in her canvas shoes. Edwin Moses was a legit CIA asset—she'd gotten an encrypted message from Langley informing her that he'd be getting in touch.

She'd come dressed for action, with hip-hugging black cargo pants that had some serious stretch to them. A long sleeve black tee with her standard issue Glock 19 in a shoulder holster that made her bra itch. Lightweight windbreaker that served no purpose other than to hide her weapon. After all, her stretchy pants were too damn tight to stick a gun down along the small of her back. And what if the barrel got stuck between her buttocks just when she needed to draw and fire?

Indy patted down the front of her tee shirt, which had ridden up over the gentle swell of her reasonably tight belly. She stretched her arms out wide, opened up her hips with side-to-side moves she'd learned in yoga, raised each knee in succession to stretch out her hamstrings.

She'd hit the weight room at the Embassy last night, doing deadlifts and squats until her quads and glutes burned. Indy was a believer in leaning on your strengths, and women were

designed to develop lower body strength rather than upper body power. Something about carrying babies in the womb for nine months and then perching the little critters on your hip for another year or so. The female body-design came from two million years of evolution, and Indy was a fan of going with the flow.

Except now the flow seemed off. Moses had been gone for almost ten minutes. He'd told her to stay inside the safe-house, that he didn't want to spook the informant-woman who supposedly had some information for him about India's nuclear program, which was always a matter of interest to the CIA.

After all, India, China, and Pakistan all shared borders with one another and each had nuclear weapons in its arsenal. Put that together with the disputed territory of Kashmir up north and it was a potentially explosive situation—certainly one that warranted attention from both CIA and DOD.

In fact just last month Indy had put together a position paper about the implications for the U.S. if China, India, and Pakistan got into a real war rather than the everyday border skirmishes that didn't even make the mainstream news. It was a standard position-paper, drawing up scenarios for the higher-

ups in Langley to consider as they hatched their schemes.

Langley got hundreds of such reports every month from CIA liaisons all over the globe.

There hadn't been a peep from Langley about the paper, but now Indy wondered if somebody had noticed and decided to get her more active in the field. So Indy shrugged off that rising nervousness as she adjusted her bra and tried to get used to the shoulder holster. She told herself this was a good thing, that her hard work was paying off, her intelligence was making higher-ups take notice, her potential becoming obvious to the movers-and-shakers of the Company.

Still, Moses had struck her as being slightly tense on the trip from the Embassy out here. He'd insisted on picking her up two blocks away from the secured gates of the Embassy, which seemed slightly odd but OK, whatever, what did she really know, she was still relatively junior, still learning.

But one thing Indy had learned early on was that intuition and instinct were your friends.

You needed to trust them.

Listen to them.

Obey them.

Because intuition and instinct had been honed by those same two million years of evolution.

Two million years of brutal struggle for survival.

Two million years of playing the endless game of life and death.

But this wasn't that sort of game, Indy told herself as she forced a smile and took several deep breaths to slow her racing heart. Yeah, Moses had seemed nervous, anxious, twitchy, edgy. For a moment she'd even wondered about his motives. After all, he'd instructed her not to tell anyone in the Embassy about this. That was no problem—Indy worked alone, didn't have a boss or a supervisor or a team. But it made her tense.

She did relax a bit when she finally got into the Range Rover with Moses. Because although he was certainly tense, it wasn't *that* sort of tension.

In fact *that* sort of tension had been sorely missing from Indy's supposedly exciting life of being a shadowy spy. There'd been no assignments to seduce ruthless billionaire Sheikhs or manipulate hunky psychotic dictators with her womanly charms. Those sorts of assignments were more rumor than reality, Indy had discovered after she'd been let behind the curtain of the CIA, seen that much of the work

involved squinting at computer screens rather than sneaking through the sewers of a dark city at midnight.

At least *her* work had been mostly drudgery. There were certainly specialist CIA *agent provocateurs* employed by the Company.

And others who did what was called *wet work*—assassinations, hits, kills, strikes, what have you. All of it unofficial, of course. NOC—Non-Official Cover Operations—was the secret program where these ghosts operated. It was so secret that most in the CIA didn't even know if the NOC program still existed after some bad publicity that resulted in a Congressional Hearing about a decade earlier. Indy certainly had no idea. Her clearance didn't get anywhere close to that kind of stuff.

If that kind of stuff even existed these days.

Because with more spy-work happening through electronic means rather than physical channels, the CIA had probably been downsizing those sorts of personnel. Nowadays those sorts of field missions might be controlled by CIA operatives but were mostly staffed with U.S. Special Forces men.

SEALs and Delta guys, who were apparently the best killers and provocateurs in the business.

Before the thought was finished the metal door to Indy's left swung open, letting in a draft of warm Mumbai air, thick with traffic fumes, heavy with smoke from street-vendor cooking fires.

Indy turned, expecting to see Moses coming back in, hopefully with the female informant they were supposed to meet out here.

Except nobody stepped through the door.

Nothing entered but the heavy air.

Indy blinked twice as a chill snaked down her back, rippling through the stiff muscles of her butt and legs. She'd heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up not long ago, but the safe-house windows were blacked out and besides, Moses had instructed her to stay hidden for now unless there were sounds of trouble outside—which, Moses had stressed, was highly unlikely.

Didn't feel so unlikely now, Indy thought as she reached for her weapon with cold trembling hands. She was a very good shot at the target range but had never drawn her weapon on the job, certainly never fired it at another human.

“Moses?” she said, drawing her gun slowly out of the leather holster. The Glock felt heavy in her hands, almost as heavy as the dread in her chest. They weren’t wearing bulletproof vests—Moses had made it clear this wasn’t that sort of field work, this wasn’t Afghanistan, no Taliban or Al Qaeda within a thousand miles.

So why was he sweating, she’d wondered on the air-conditioned drive over. She’d noticed the thin veneer of perspiration on Moses’ forehead, noted that the veteran CIA asset seemed uneasy in a way that made no sense for a guy who’d probably seen it all and done it all a thousand times over.

Unless this was something different, Indy thought now as she aimed her gun at the empty rectangle of Mumbai twilight beyond the open door.

She began to inch towards the threshold.

And then something exploded out of the empty space beyond the door.

Indy just about caught a glimpse of a tall muscled man in black clothes and dark glasses surging into the safe-house like a force of nature. He was as silent as he was swift, getting to her with such speed that Indy couldn’t bring her gun all the



way up to take aim before he grabbed her wrist and swung her body around so he was behind her.

Indy shouted and pulled the trigger but she was hopelessly out of position. The man's forearm went around her throat from behind as the bullet slammed dead into the concrete wall with a dull *thud*.

Then pain shot up through Indy's arm as the man twisted her wrist while tightening his grip on her throat.

She dropped the gun, then tried to break out of the choke hold. She'd been trained to do it, but this guy had clearly been trained to counter her training.

She tried to stomp on his feet but he sidestepped her with the grace of a dancer.

She elbowed him backwards in the abdomen but it was like hitting a wall of muscle.

She swung her free arm down backwards viciously to get him in the balls, but he turned his body and rammed the side of his hip into her ass, driving her forward directly into the concrete wall, his arm still around her throat, his muscled weight slamming her into the wall with enough of an impact to

knock the breath out of her, almost knock the damn life out of her.

Indy suddenly knew she was defeated. He was immensely strong, completely overwhelming. Her cheek was flat against the rough concrete wall. The man pressed against her from behind, his sharp hipbone digging into her ass, his weight holding her so tight against the wall she was completely powerless, absolutely owned, totally dominated.

He'd been silent as death all this while, but now he spoke.

His voice was cold like steel, an expressionless monotone that sent ripples of fear down Indy's back.

“This is a chokehold but I am not choking you,” he said in that deadly tone. “That will change very quickly if you fuck with me again.”

Indy tried to turn her head to look at him but couldn't. She nodded stiffly against the wall, the rough concrete wreaking havoc on her skin like a very harsh exfoliant.

“I need to hear you say it, O'Donnell,” he growled.

“Say what?” Why did he know her name, she wondered. “That I surrender? Submit? Give up?”

Had he just killed Moses, she wondered as her heart hammered inside her chest, her blood throbbed in her head. She had no idea what the hell was going on, but Indy had been trained to control her panic with breathing and she did it now.

Immediately her mind cleared up, and Indy was back in control.

Well, in control of her mind, at least.

Because this guy was very much in control of her body.

The impact of being slammed against the wall still reverberated through her bones like a shockwave, but Indy noted that the man had done it with such control that she hadn't hit her head on the concrete, wasn't bleeding, wasn't broken.

Just overpowered in a way that sent a message.

*You can't win against me, so don't fucking try.*

"That'll do," he grunted, releasing her so suddenly it took her breath away as his weight on her body was suddenly gone. "Don't turn until I say so. Hands above your head, palms flat against the wall, please. Do it now."

Indy obeyed. She stayed facing the wall, her hands flat against the concrete, legs slightly parted. Her breath came hot

and heavy, sending tiny puffs of concrete dust into the air around her nostrils, making her nose itchy and sneezy, her eyes blurry and watery.

She heard the man retrieve her gun from the floor. Then she sensed him approach her from behind. He stopped not far from her ass, his position and proximity sending a deadly ripple of something more than just fear through Indy's body.

"I'm going to search you for weapons," he said softly, his voice closer than she'd expected, his warm breath against her neck making her shudder. "This goes easier if you come clean with what's hidden where."

"Um, there's nothing hidden anywhere," Indy said, blinking twice and gasping silently at the sudden image of this shadowy beast of a man searching every part of her, probing every nook, poking every cranny, examining every crook, sniffing every crevice. "My phone, wallet, and ID are in my cargo flaps. I'm not carrying any weapons." She hesitated. "Any other weapons, I mean. You already have my gun."

The man grunted again, then stepped right up to her ass, pausing for one long dangerous moment before quickly patting her down. He did it hard and rough but with what almost felt like professional courtesy. His hands didn't linger in her

crotch, didn't grope beneath her breasts, didn't slide between her buttocks. He touched all those parts but with the clinical precision of a surgeon, the emotionless efficiency of a robot.

"Turn around, O'Donnell." His voice came from some distance behind her now, far enough away that she was surprised he'd backed away that fast.

Maybe even a bit disappointed.

The thought sickened her, made her wonder if the rush of panic had flooded her system with all sorts of chemicals and hormones, messing up her mind, playing havoc with her body.

She forced herself to breathe. In and out, long inhales with extended exhales, sending messages to her heart that things were all right.

On her third long exhale relief finally washed over her.

She wasn't going to be murdered just yet, her bodily instincts informed her.

But her body was also still informing her of some other instincts that appeared to have been shaken awake by the sudden violence.

Thankfully Indy was too busy fighting back a ferocious sneeze to pay much attention to any secret messages from her

throbbing body.

She lost the fight against the sneeze-attack. It came hard and ferocious, deadlier than she feared and about twice as wet.

Indy staggered back, sneezed twice more, then sniffled noisily and opened her eyes just in time to see two large dollops of her fresh nasal wetness slobbered on the man's sunglasses.

Slowly the man removed his glasses and frowned down at them. He examined the carnage, wiped the lenses off with the bottom his black tee shirt, then slid the glasses back on.

But not before he glared at her with burning green eyes that shone like emeralds on fire.

“That sneeze qualifies as a weapon,” he informed her crisply, an edge of amusement in his voice that Indy sensed he was trying damn hard not to reveal. “But now that I’ve been forewarned, go ahead and sneeze it out so we can begin.”

Indy rubbed her nose, sniffled again noisily, then shook her head to indicate she was sneezed out for now. She blinked the sneeze-tears from her eyes, then blinked twice more when her gaze fell upon the man properly for the first time.

He was tall like a tree, broad like a bridge, with neatly cropped hair and day-old stubble. His arms were thick like pillars beneath his long-sleeve tee, his legs like tree-trunks beneath the black combat pants. She glanced down at his boots, which seemed bigger than her head, then looked back towards his eyes which were now hidden behind those sunglasses again.

“You’re American,” she said, wincing and touching her cheek where it had scraped the concrete wall. It burned but wasn’t bleeding. She wasn’t going to be scarred for life. “Who the hell are you? Where’s Moses?”

“Forget Moses. And I’m the one asking questions here, O’Donnell.” He grunted lazily in her direction. “But I shouldn’t even have to ask any questions because you know the answers I need. So just tell me. Don’t make me ask. I don’t like talking more than necessary. It makes me grumpy. And you do *not* want to see me grumpy, O’Donnell. Trust me on that.”

Indy stared, not sure if she’d sneezed herself into some other dimension. She touched her cheek again, the burning pain bringing her back to the harsh reality of this strange new dimension where a muscular American man in sunglasses had

just burst into her life, slammed her into a concrete wall, and was now informing her that he was asking the questions but no, he didn't want to actually ask the questions, just wanted her to answer questions that weren't asked, like she was a mind-reader, a sorceress, an Indian guru-woman with access to secret knowledge of the universe and its mysteries.

Oh, and he wasn't even grumpy yet.

Which meant maybe he was right about her not wanting to see him grumpy.

"I'm CIA," she said, her tone stupidly indignant. After all, he probably already knew she was CIA. "This has got to be a mistake. My ID's in my pocket. This is definitely a mistake. Just let me make a phone call and you can—"

"This isn't the kind of arrest where you get a phone call, O'Donnell." The man's head didn't move. Those dark glasses were pointed in her direction. She couldn't see his eyes behind them. She didn't like that one bit.

"Arrest?" It took her a moment to process what he'd said. "I'm being ... *arrested*? By whom? For what? This is crazy. And it's totally a mistake. It has to be a—"



“Look, O’Donnell,” he snapped, cutting her off with cold precision. “I’ve been authorized to make any deal I see fit. Which means I can help you. But I need to *want* to help you. And we’re not quite there yet.”

The man smiled now, a tightly cold smile that messed with Indy’s mind.

“What ... what gets us there?” Indy stammered.

“You know what.”

“Oh, right. You’re asking the questions, but you don’t like to ask questions because asking questions makes you grumpy and you don’t want to get grumpy.” Indy wanted to roll her eyes but managed to stop herself, gulping when it occurred to her that Moses was nowhere to be seen or heard.

Was he lying dead outside the door, his neck broken by Mister Not-Yet-Grumpy?

But now it also occurred to Indy that she’d heard the Range Rover’s engine roaring to life just before this monster roared into her life and turned it upside down—or at least sideways.

“Did you kill Moses?” she asked, her tone dumbly accusatory given that she’d already guessed Moses had left her

and hightailed it out of here.

“Forget Moses. You have bigger problems, O’Donnell.”

“Most people call me Indy.”

“Shut up, O’Donnell.”

Indy raised both her eyebrows. “Make up your mind. You want answers or you want me to shut up?”

Grumpy McMonster said nothing. Indy wished she could see his eyes so she’d know if she was getting to him.

Except wait, why did she *want* to get to him?

She needed to convince him this was a mistake, right?

And a good start would be to not aggravate him, right?

So her plan should be to *not* get to him, right?

“We’re getting further away from where we need to be, O’Donnell,” he said, his voice suddenly soft, unnervingly gentle, like this was the calm before the storm, the eye of the hurricane, the deadly stillness before everything exploded into chaos.

Indy said nothing. She needed to think. This man was American, and from the way he was built almost certainly

military. A SEAL or Delta guy, if she had to guess. CIA mostly pulled from those branches of U.S. Special Forces.

“You’re Delta,” Indy said with fake self-assurance, like she knew even though she was just guessing. It was a 50-50 chance she was right, and being right might get to him.

But wait, Indy reminded herself angrily. The point is *not* to get to him, you dumb bitch.

The man shifted on his feet. It was a subtle shift, just a slight movement of weight from one foot to the other. But it told her something.

Told her that maybe she *was* getting to him.

And as ill-advised as it might be, maybe that was her only path forward, her only way out of this.

Whatever the hell *this* was.

The man said nothing for what felt like a long time. An awkwardly long time, during which Indy shifted about eight times on her own feet, was desperate to adjust her bra strap which was itching from the darn shoulder holster that turned out to be totally pointless because it was empty now.

He’d disarmed her like a bully snatching some kid’s toy at the playground. Indy wished she’d spent more time in the gym

working on her shoulders and arms instead of doing all those dumb squats that only made her body look more pear-shaped than it already was. She hunched her shoulders which had felt weak like chicken wings against his immense strength.

“Sit.” His command cut through the silence like a razor.

Indy blinked like a butterfly testing its wings. She glanced at the cold metal chair and gulped. This was not going in the right direction at all. It was obviously a mistake. They had the wrong O’Donnell. Someone had given this guy bad information, and Indy had better correct it before she got her neck snapped like a chicken.

Yes, it was obviously a mistake. But it was such a humongously gargantuan mistake that Indy didn’t even know where to begin!

She wanted to jump up and down and scream. She considered doing it but the dread in her chest kept her weighted to the floor, unable to catch enough of a breath to let it out as a scream.

“I said *sit*,” came his voice through the screaming silence in her head. “I won’t say it again, O’Donnell. I’ll just break your knees and make it so all you can fucking *do* is sit.”

A flash of anger rose up Indy's throat. "Is it really necessary to talk like that?" she demanded, knowing she was being unnecessarily combative, perhaps making herself look guilty of whatever it was this guy thought she'd done.

The man said nothing. No shifting his weight from one booted foot to the other. He was still like a statue, silent like stone.

He was all business.

Maybe breaking her knees wasn't just an idle threat.

Indy gulped, then moved towards the metal chair.

"No," he said coldly. "The chair is mine. You sit on the floor. Over there against the wall. Do it now."

"There are two chairs," she protested, unable to stop herself.

"They're both mine. Your place is the floor. Get over there, O'Donnell. Now."

Indy blinked about a hundred times, glanced towards where he'd gestured with his head.

The spot against the wall hadn't been swept in about six generations. There were dust bunnies the size of elephants waiting for her black-clad butt.

Now Indy thought back to her CIA training at the Farm. There'd been a session on interrogation and negotiation. Indy remembered the instructor saying something about "setting the frame" and "establishing dominance."

That's what he was doing.

Setting the frame.

Establishing dominance.

Doing it pretty darn well, she had to admit.

But Indy needed to at least *try* to counter his moves.

"I prefer to sit in a chair," she said, making sure not to plead or beg, not to show fear or submissiveness.

She glanced at the metal chair, swallowed hard, then took a step towards it.

And he was on her in a flash.

One arm slid around her waist and closed tight. Indy gasped as he whipped her body around, grabbed her by the back of the neck, pushed her down to her knees, held her there from behind, his hand still curled around the back of her neck like a vise.

Indy's head spun. She took gasping breaths. He'd moved with shocking quickness, nothing like she'd ever experienced.

His grip on the back of her neck was unbreakable. Her knees hurt from being pushed down on them so fast. The feeling of his arm grabbing and turning her body made her burn along her waistline where he'd touched her.

And yet again the man had been in such complete control that he'd shaken her up without really hurting her.

But he'd made it damn clear that he *could* hurt her.

He could do anything he wanted with her.

"Told you, all the chairs are for me," he said, snaking his palm up along the back of her neck, sending hot shivers down her spine.

Indy gasped now as his fingers slid through the back of her hair, fisting her silky black tresses down near the roots, sending rockets of burning pain shooting through her scalp.

She yelped as the man pulled her forward by her hair until she had no choice but to crawl on her knees in the direction he chose.

He led her to the herd of dust bunnies against the unpainted concrete wall, then released her almost as hard as

he'd grabbed her.

Indy was completely turned around now, not sure what she felt, not sure if it was pain or panic, fury or fear, instinct or indignation.

But she damn well felt *something*.

Something that didn't seem right for this situation.

Something that seemed to confirm she wasn't thinking straight at all.

Sure as hell wasn't *feeling* straight.

She sat her ass down, crossed her legs in her stretchy pants, smoothed out her ravaged hair, then looked up at him with fire in her eyes.

“You're going to answer for that once all this is cleared up and you realize you've got the wrong O'Donnell,” she snarled. “Court martial at the very least. Dishonorable discharge too, I would think. You'll lose your pension and benefits. Maybe even go to prison. Leavenworth, isn't it? That's where they put you Army guys when you abuse your power?”

The man said nothing. He watched her sitting there cross-legged like a child in kindergarten railing at the teacher. Then he shrugged like he didn't give a shit, a hint of an amused



smile showing on his lips before he strolled across the room towards the metal chair.

He dragged it over on two legs, doing it slow and lazy, the ungodly screech of metal on tiles almost driving Indy to homicidal madness. She wanted to cover her ears but refused to give him the satisfaction.

After an interminably torturous stretch of time that was probably only a few seconds but felt like a decade the man placed the chair facing away from Indy. Then he swung his leg over the seat, sat down heavily, resting his forearms on the backrest and looking down at her with that hint of amusement on his stubbly face.

Then he took off his shades.

Looked directly into her eyes.

Made her body tremble all the way through, shiver all the way around, shudder all the way deep.

But this time it had nothing to do with fear.

This time it had nothing to do with pain.

This time it had nothing to do with reason or rationality, common sense or calculation.

This time it was *all* instinct, *all* intuition, *all* feeling.

An instinct she couldn't name.

An intuition she couldn't describe.

A feeling she couldn't understand.

Ice couldn't understand it. It was like he'd been given a pile of jigsaw pieces from different puzzles and no picture on the box to even give him a clear starting point, never mind a reasonable target.

He'd studied her eyes and mouth as she proclaimed her innocence.

He'd listened for every intonation in her voice, watched her chest move as she breathed, stayed alert for those subtle signs that proved she was a liar, a cheat, crooked, dirty.

But Ice picked up none of those signs.

Perhaps because this woman was getting his wires crossed, getting his signals mixed up, getting his cold-as-ice blood boiling like a fucking inferno.

She was just straight-up *getting* to him.

But maybe it wasn't just her—it was *all* of it. Everything from Benson being a secretive snake to Moses being a clueless coward. If Ice's instincts were working as well as they'd been a couple of years ago, the last time he'd been out in the field, then hell, he might actually believe this fiery-eyed, raven-

haired bombshell of a woman who was sitting there cross-legged and glaring up at him like she thought her stare could cut him in half.

Except obviously Ice's instincts were *not* as sharp as they'd been.

He was rusty with his technique, out of touch with his usually spot-on intuition to read a suspect and know *immediately* if they were dirty or not.

Yeah, maybe Ice's gut was only telling him what he wanted to hear.

After all, hadn't he started this mission apprehensive about the prospect of putting down a woman, crossing a line he'd never crossed before?

So wasn't it possible that a part of him *wanted* her to be innocent so he wouldn't have to cross that line at all?

Shit, Ice thought. He was in trouble now. Because that guilty-or-innocent intuition usually kicked in on the very first impression of his suspect.

It was all about that one moment when you were first in the physical presence of your target.

That moment was when the body's intelligence sent you signals after making an instantaneous judgement about a person's character, a person's motives, a person's intentions.

A person's essence.

Yeah, he was in trouble now.

Because the signals his body was sending were *not* useful in this situation.

In fact they were downright dangerous.

And from the way she was looking up at him now, Ice wondered if she could see it.

See that she could get to him.

Maybe even break him before he broke her.

"Look, O'Donnell," he said, forcing himself to speak before his thoughts dragged him to a very dangerous place, that dark place in every man's psyche, that demon which lives in every man's heart, a beast that urges him to take what he wants, to devour what he desires, to seize what he seeks.

"My friends call me Indy," she said, her brown eyes still flashing but with something else now, as if she was studying him like he'd studied her, reading him like he'd read her,

playing him like he'd played her. "Don't you want us to be friends?"

"No," said Ice, wincing inwardly for answering the damn question, for even acknowledging the game she was trying to play.

She shrugged her narrow shoulders, leaned back against the wall, looked up at him.

And smiled.

It was a teasing, taunting smile, and along with her mussed-up hair and the beginnings of a bruise on her cheekbone where Ice had pushed her against the wall, Indy O'Donnell looked a bit wild, slightly unhinged.

And hot as hell.

Stay focused, you idiot, Ice warned himself as his cock throbbed in his pants, the cool metal of the chair doing nothing to contain the heat generated by his cock and balls right now.

Ice swallowed hard, wishing to hell he hadn't taken off his shades, hadn't given her a window into his soul. But shit, now he couldn't put them back on. It would be a show of weakness, a sign of vulnerability, a crack in the frame of dominance that

he needed to establish so she'd submit, surrender, spill her secrets, tell her truths.

“Tell me the truth and this ends now,” Ice said, keeping his gaze as cool as he could, hoping to hell his poker face was as solid as it used to be, praying to the angels and demons that his eyes didn't reveal what his heart was whispering with every beat:

*She's already telling you the truth.*

But Ice silenced the whisper, shut down the feeling, informed his instincts that they were rusty and out-of-touch, that he needed his intelligence to take over, get rationality to run the show.

“You know the truth.” Indy locked her gaze onto his, holding it for almost a full minute before she blinked and glanced down at the floor.

Ice exhaled. He saw the effort it had taken Indy to hold his gaze that long, to hold her own poker face. She wouldn't be able to play this game for too long. She'd crack like an egg once Ice got his head right and put the pressure back on.

Except he needed to watch himself when it came to getting physical.

There was something dangerous building up in him, and Ice knew damn well that the only difference between a good man and a bad man was one fucking choice, one decision made in a situation like this, one moment of weakness where a man gives in to the darkness in his heart, unleashes the beast in his soul.

Like they say, with power comes responsibility.

And Ice had absolute power over this woman right now.

So he needed to damn well watch himself.

Make sure that when this was over, he could still look himself in the mirror and pretend he was a good man.

“You’re a good man,” she said like she could read his mind, turning her brown-eyed gaze back towards his stone-cold face that was so tight his damn jaw hurt. “You’re just doing your job. Following orders. But you’ve been given bad intel, Mister ... what is your name, by the way?”

Ice swallowed thickly, knowing that she was following the damn CIA training manual, trying to make it seem like they were on the same side, saying things to remind him that she was a person and so was he, that this whole thing was about



their relationship and nothing else, that there was nobody else in the room, just the two of them.

A man and a woman.

“Call me Sir,” said Ice evenly, the tension in his jaw matching the tension in his damn balls.

Indy blinked twice, a flash of color darkening her light brown cheeks. She touched her mussed-up hair, blinked again, then shrugged.

“All right, but only if you call me Indy,” she offered, playing her way through the CIA manual perfectly, making every concession conditional, quid pro quo, if I do what you ask then you must do what I ask.

“This isn’t a negotiation.”

“Everything is a negotiation.”

Ice snorted. “Is that what the CIA is teaching you kids at the Farm these days?”

Indy shook her head. “Learned that on my own. And don’t call me kid.” She took a breath, widened her eyes. “*Sir.*”

Ice almost lost his cold poker face, almost cracked a grin at the pointedly teasing way she called him *Sir*. It felt playful, but Ice didn’t drop his guard.

After all, she was playing for her damn life here.

She was smart as hell, and Ice's instincts seemed off around her, which meant he needed to be cautious, careful, wary, watchful.

So he watched her silently for a good three minutes. Silence always unnerved the guilty. And Ice could out-silence a monk in an interrogation room. As a Delta guy he'd gone weeks without saying a single word to another human, moving silent like a breeze across the land, keeping his breathing steady and his mind clear, retreating into himself until his own heartbeat was loud like a drum, the rhythms of his body synching up with the rhythms of nature as he stalked his target, hunted his enemy, claimed his prize.

He'd read Indy O'Donnell's CIA file backward and forward, going through every detail. There was nothing about her birth-parents and their tragic ends. All that had come directly from Benson, from the jaws of the jackal, the tongue of the snake, the mouth of the coyote himself.

"Your birth parents would have been proud when you got accepted to the CIA," Ice said softly, keeping his gaze fixed on her face, looking for a flinch, a flicker, a flash. "It would have

destroyed them to know their overachiever daughter is a traitor.”

Indy flinched and flickered and flashed all at once, and Ice once again cursed himself inwardly for saying too much. He should have stopped after saying that crap about her parents being proud. Stopped and waited to see how she reacted, if she offered something about who she really thought of as her parents.

Hell, maybe she didn't even know about her birth parents, about how they'd died. Sure, she'd have to know she was adopted, considering neither of the O'Donnells was of Indian descent. But maybe Benson had been lying about how “scarred” and “damaged” she was from her birth-parents' untimely deaths. She would only know what she'd been told, and since nothing was in her CIA file, maybe Indy O'Donnell hadn't been told anything.

Which was perhaps a way into this woman's mind.

Create a vulnerability and then exploit it.

“You said *would have been* proud. How do you know my birth parents are dead?” she whispered, her face peaked with surprise. “It's not in my file. Nobody at CIA knows about that except the man who recruited me.”

Now it was Ice who flinched like he'd been shot. He stared at Indy like she was a ghost, a mirage, a trick of light, an illusion of the dark.

Obviously she was sharp enough to parse his words carefully, note that Ice only mentioned her parents because he knew about her mother dying in childbirth, her father taking his own life.

But what hit Ice like a hammer was the revelation that nobody in the CIA knew about her birth-parents except for the man who recruited her.

A lying, scheming, two-faced coyote of a man.

Ice didn't even need to ask for a name.

He just said the words, watched Indy's face go pale, saw the shock go through her like a wave.

"John Benson," Ice whispered, shaking his head and slapping the cargo flap containing his Darkwater phone. "Sonofabitch."

He pushed himself backwards off the chair, reached for the phone, then stopped when he heard a sound.

The sound of knocking.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

From outside, on the metal door.

Ice frowned, then acted.

He strode over to Indy, his finger on his lips for her to stay silent. Then he grabbed her arm and yanked her up from the floor, dragged her to the small lavatory, shoved her inside.

“Stay,” he commanded in an urgent whisper, making sure the look in his eyes told her this was not the time to protest or push back, to argue or negotiate.

She got the message loud and clear, nodding once, her eyes wide with a potent mix of confusion and fear.

Ice closed the lavatory door, waited to hear Indy lock it. Then he stepped lightly towards the front door, drawing the weapon he'd taken off Indy as he approached.

The knocks came again, this time harder, impatient.

Ice pressed himself against the side wall. This was a safe-house in name only. There was no high-tech security, no cameras watching the perimeter, no booby traps ready for deployment, no armory with grenade launchers, not even a damn second exit which was standard operating procedure. It was nothing more than an incognito location.

And it was getting a lot of traffic for an incognito location, that was for damn sure.

Another set of knocks. Ice knew he had to answer. The knocks were loud and heavy, which meant the visitors assumed they were expected.

Ice whipped through the possibilities.

Narrowed them down to two likely options.

Selected one of those two options.

Went with it and yanked open the door.

“Was in the bathroom,” he grumbled, gesturing with his head towards the closed lavatory door. “I wouldn’t go in there for at least an hour if I were you.”

There were two men standing outside in the dusty twilight. Both were Indian, short but powerfully built, dressed in khaki combat pants and white bush-shirts hanging untucked and mostly unbuttoned.

Without moving his eyes Ice could tell they were packing heat in their cargo flaps. That alone told Ice everything he needed to know. Moses had confirmed how hard it was to source weapons in this country. And the penalties for carrying without a permit were draconian, like ten years in an Indian

prison, where you'd be dead in eight weeks just from the dysentery. So if these two studmuffins were carrying guns, it meant they were here to use them.

This was a wet team.

CIA used a lot of subcontractors nowadays, and these fit the profile of local thugs-for-hire. They were probably subcontracted by some American private security company with a standing contract to one of CIA's shell companies. Ice had seen it all, and he knew damn well what this was.

The only question was who called it in.

As suspicious as Benson's motives might be, Ice didn't think the guy would ship a Darkwater man all the way down here and then send in a local wet team. If Benson wanted Indy O'Donnell dead, she'd already be dead and Ice would never have known her name, would still be in the U.S. looking for Diego Vargas with Jack and the rest of the Darkwater guys.

Which meant it was probably Indy's crooked CIA contact who wanted her dead ASAP.

Probably, but not definitely.

There was one other possibility.

CIA Director Martin Kaiser himself.

Yeah, Kaiser might want Indy dead too.

Made sense, in a way. Kaiser had been CIA Director for over a decade, and surely there were others gunning for his position, other CIA bigshots who were hungry for the top spot, looking for any reason to take Kaiser down.

And a traitor in the ranks of Kaiser's CIA would look pretty damn bad for the Director.

So yeah, Kaiser also had a motive to want Indy taken out quiet and quick.

After all, didn't Moses use the words "clean this up" earlier, like he'd already guessed this was a simple hit and nothing more?

"You are Moses, yes?" asked the sweatier of the two men, a bull-necked monster with three-day-old grizzle thick like burrs on his broad face.

Ice grunted and gestured with his head for them to enter. He waited till they walked past the threshold, then Ice glanced out the open door towards the front of the building.

There was a well-maintained motorbike parked alongside Ice's Jeep. A Royal Enfield, 1000cc, four-stroke engine. It would sound like thunder, roar like a lion, eat the road like a



hog. Ice hadn't heard it pull in over the incessant drone of cars and trucks along the main road, the constant cacophony of horns and hoots, curses from drivers mixing with calls from street vendors.

“Where is the woman?” said the second guy, jowly and frog-faced with killer's eyes that darted around the room, settled momentarily on the closed bathroom door, then flicked back to Ice.

Ice shrugged as he closed the front door and locked it from the inside, just in case there was another guy outside that he'd missed. This was already getting a bit crowded, and it had been a couple of years since Ice had been in combat.

Of course, he was in the best shape of his damn life after two years hitting the West Point gym, not to mention competing against Jack in their garage gym back at the house. Constant combat training with the other instructors at West Point followed by long hard runs through the woods of upstate New York had made Ice lean like a machine, cut like a sculpture, readier than maybe he'd ever been for battle.

But there was also something else that made Ice's battle instincts flare in a dangerous, deadly way.

Something raw and primal that made his fists clench, made his eyes glint.

Heated him up with a kind of fire that was unfamiliar, like something new was burning in Ice's heart, something fresh bubbling through his blood.

A fire that had something to do with Indy O'Donnell.

Like that woman was his responsibility.

Like she was his mission.

His to break, of course.

But not yet.

Not right now.

Because right now, she was his to protect.

"She isn't here yet," Ice grunted. "Sit down. Have a smoke. She'll be here soon."

The bull-necked guy patted his shirt pocket where Ice had seen the bulge of a cigarette pack. Bull-neck dragged one of the metal chairs away from the table and sat his weight down on it. He drew out a cigarette from his pack, lit it with a match, inhaled deep, puffed out hard.

Bull-neck was chilling now, but Frog-face was still on his feet, those killer's eyes still darting around the room, shooting sharp glances at the bathroom door, then back at Ice.

Ice had put Indy's Glock back into his cargo flap before opening the door for these goons. He'd left the cargo flap open, and now his arm dangled lazily down along his side, fingers grazing the open flap. He could draw and fire in less than a second, hit his mark dead center. But two guys made it tricky, especially when one of them was already suspicious.

*"Voh andar ho sakatee hai,"* murmured Frog-face to his buddy, speaking what Ice figured was Hindi. *"Dekh lo."*

The adrenaline surged in Ice but he stood still. He didn't understand the words but he understood the tone like it was a damn billboard.

Bull-neck grunted, took another puff from his cigarette, then tossed the butt onto the concrete floor and stood. He began to walk towards the closed bathroom door, and Ice knew he needed to move now or things could get very messy.

"Do not move, please," came Frog-face's voice from Ice's left.

Ice very much moved, spinning around and drawing his weapon in one quick motion, firing twice at Frog-face while backpedaling and weaving.

Ice's first bullet hit Frog-face in the shoulder, spinning the stocky man around and sending him staggering backwards. Ice went down into a crouch and turned to take out Bull-neck, but the guy had flipped over the metal table and was down behind it.

Ice fired twice into the steel, but for all the shortcomings of the safe-house Moses had decided not to skimp on the furniture. The bullets pounded into the steel tabletop, creating two massive dents but not breaking through the metal.

Ice fired one more shot into the table, then whipped his body around when a bullet shattered the floor-tile beside him.

Frog-face was still tottering on his feet, his white shirt streaked with hot red blood from his shoulder wound. He had drawn and was firing, but with his left hand, which made him miss badly.

Frog-face's next three bullets smashed into the blackened windows, shattering the frosted glass. Ice fired two rapid shots, putting one into Frog-face's center mass, right in the

chest, the bullet shattering his sternum and smashing into the man's heart.

Frog-face went down hard, dead before he hit the concrete.

Then everything went silent, nothing but the echoes of gunshots ricocheting off concrete walls.

The safe-house was clouded in gunsmoke, the air thick with the pungent scent of sulfur. Ice stayed low in a half-crouch, ready to move, gun aimed at the top of the turned-over table, waiting for just the speck of a shot.

But Bull-neck wasn't going to stick his head up. Instead he stuck just his gun above the steel edge of the table, taking haphazard blind shots.

Ice stayed in position.

Took careful aim.

And shot the gun out of Bull-neck's hand.

Then Ice pushed off the floor, charged the table, meeting Bull-neck just as the man emerged with a bewildered expression and a bloody right hand which was missing at least one finger and most of the thumb.

Ice hit Bull-neck full in the midsection with a heads-down charge, driving the man hard against the wall, cracking most of

his ribs and breaking his spine. The man went limp against the wall, and Ice stepped back and let him fall on his face. He considered breaking the man's neck to make sure, but snapping his spine seemed to have done the trick.

Quickly Ice patted the dead man down, finding nothing but a single key with the Royal Enfield insignia carved into the steel. He pocketed the key, then retrieved the man's gun. It was a Sig Sauer 9mm, old model but in decent shape. Ice had to pull a severed index finger off the trigger.

It was only when Ice strode over to Frog-face to grab his gun too that he noticed the lavatory door was now open.

"Oh, hell," came Indy O'Donnell's voice. "What ... what just ... what ..."

"We're leaving, that's what," Ice snapped. "Move, Indy."

He shoved the two new weapons into spare cargo sections of his pants, then grabbed Indy's arm and dragged her towards the door. She stumbled as he pulled her, her attention fixated on the two dead bodies, Frog-face's shirt now streaked red down the front from his destroyed heart, Bull-neck twisted in a grotesquely unnatural position, his bloody right hand splayed out not far from his severed finger and thumb like he was trying to put himself back together for the afterlife.

“Who . . . who are they?” she stammered as Ice slid the deadbolt off the front door and yanked it open. “I mean, who *were* they, I guess.”

Ice didn’t answer. Right now they needed to get the hell out of here. The only saving grace was that it was fully dark outside now and the traffic noise was still loud enough to have masked the sounds of Frog-face’s wild gunshots that smashed through the safe-house windows.

But those wild gunshots appeared to have hit something after all.

“Shit,” Ice muttered as he stared at the two bulletholes in his Jeep’s front grill. There was a rapidly expanding puddle of sludgy black oil beneath the engine block. “We need another ride.”

Ice glanced at the motorcycle, felt the key in his pocket. A bike wasn’t ideal if you had a prisoner, but it was the only thing available right now.

Ice didn’t waste time thinking too hard. He grabbed his duffel from the Jeep, unzipped it and pulled out one of the heavy-duty plastic ties that he always carried in case he needed to detain someone.

“Get on the bike behind me, Indy,” Ice commanded as he swung his leg over the leather seat and settled into position. “And bring your arms around.”

Indy stood there like she was in a trance. Ice glanced up at her. This was obviously her first close-up experience with lethal violence, maybe the first time she’d seen a dead body.

“You’ll get used to it,” he grunted, perhaps a bit too casually. “A dead body won’t seem so shocking to you next time—and I suspect there will be a next time. Now get on the damn bike, Indy. Don’t make me ask again.”

Ice kicked the bike to life, the four-stroke engine thundering beneath him, sending a surge of adrenaline through his body. Back when they were teenagers he and Jack used to ride their Kawasaki Ninjas through the winding empty highways of upstate New York, racking up tickets like it was a contest. It was only when Ice realized that if he got booked for reckless speeding it might nix his chances to get into West Point that he hung up his riding boots.

But it felt damn good to be back in the saddle again.

Now he felt Indy slip into the seat behind him, her feminine fragrance cutting through the smoky Mumbai air, adding a sexy spice to the scent of gasoline and gunpowder.



“Put your arms around me,” Ice said gruffly. “All the way around, so your hands are in front of me. That’s it.”

Ice’s breath caught as Indy slid her arms around his hard abdomen, her fingers clasping each other dangerously close to his suddenly stiffening cock.

Swallowing hard Ice slipped that plastic tie around her wrists and drew it closed tight, securing her close to his body, feeling her side up against his back, her soft breasts pushing against his hard frame and making it difficult to see straight, to think straight, to feel anything else but her body against his, her hands tied around his core, her crotch nestled up against his ass.

Indy said nothing from behind him.

No protests, no wisecracks, no challenges, no complaints.

Ice considered explaining that he could have tied her to the frame of the bike, but that would be dangerous. She might get tossed off if Ice had to take a hard turn, and she’d be dragged along with the bike, maybe even drag the bike down and kill them both.

But Ice said nothing either. Didn’t explain a damn thing.

Maybe because he *couldn’t* explain a damn thing.

Sure as hell couldn't explain why it felt like this, Ice thought as he kicked the bike into gear and rumbled slowly down the side street towards the main road, where they'd be lost in traffic within minutes, lost in the moment within seconds, perhaps lost in each other forever.

Indy was lost.

Lost in the throaty rumble of the engine throbbing between her legs, the pistons pumping behind her ass, the heavy shudders vibrating her entire body.

Her nipples were pricked to hard points against his broad back, her legs spread wide on the leather seat, her crotch searingly close to his muscular butt. She'd never been on a motorcycle before, certainly not pressed up against a muscled beast with abs that felt like ridged stone and a way about him that signaled both danger and safety, pain and pleasure, protection and devastation.

“You called me Indy,” she murmured against his back as he weaved the heavy bike effortlessly through the chaotic clusters of scooters and buses, taxicabs and bullock-carts, lorries packed to the point of overflow, rickshaws teetering under the load of more people than should reasonably be able to fit in a three-wheeled vehicle. “Which means we’re friends now, so you have to tell me your name.”

She didn't think he would hear over the rumble of the bike and the screech of brakes and the orchestra of horns, but he

turned his head and glanced back at her.

“Ice,” he said curtly, turning his attention back to the road, revving the bike like maybe he wanted to drown out the sound of his heart beating faster.

Because Indy could hear his heart speed up as she pressed her ear to his back, listening like a spy searching for secrets. Her own heart thrummed like an excited rabbit behind her boobs, and it felt so wonderful that Indy refused to think about how her feelings right now made no sense, how it *couldn't* make any sense that she was feeling ...

Happy?

Was that even possible?

Was that even *healthy*?

Was she in shock, perhaps? After all, she'd just been through an intense couple of hours, starting with this particular man slamming her into a wall, pushing her to the floor, grabbing her hair and making her crawl like an animal on the floor, crouch down in front of him while he sat above her on that chair, manspreading in her direction like his balls were instruments of interrogation, his cock a tool of torture.

But at the same time he'd patted her down with cold dispassion, Indy remembered as she wondered what she'd have done if he'd taken his time with that full-body search, popped up her bra and lifted her breasts, pulled down her panties and inspected her ass, spread her legs and parted her slit, just in case there was something important hidden inside.

The thoughts made her gasp.

The images made her wet.

And the memory of when she'd stepped out of the lavatory and seen the carnage in the room, understood in a flash that Ice had defended her, protected her, *killed* for her ... shit, that did something to her too, didn't it?

Now Indy was totally turned around, and being pressed up against this man wasn't helping get her head straight. It was only when she felt Ice move and saw that he was looking at a map on his phone that she was dragged back to reality.

A reality where she was not a joyrider with a hunk but instead the prisoner of a beast who was clearly capable of doing anything to anyone and never looking back.

Now the harshness of the real world hit Indy like a punch to the gut. That fleeting moment of euphoria was gone. That

sickening sense of arousal was now just sickness without the arousal. The fear came back like it was hunting her. The dread kept building like it was eating her.

“Who were those men?” she asked, pulling her face away from his back and speaking loud and clear next to his ear.

“And why do you know John Benson’s name?”

Ice didn’t respond. She tried to see what he was looking at on the map. But he was too tall and broad for Indy to see over his shoulder, so she just scanned their surroundings, stayed alert for landmarks she recognized.

The safe-house was in a distant suburb of Mumbai, but after almost a year in the country Indy was familiar enough with the city that she knew they were headed to South Mumbai, the main part of the city, the old part of the city, with centuries-old British-era stone buildings amongst the shining steel-and-glass modern towers rising from neighborhoods boasting some of the world’s highest real estate prices.

“I have the same questions as you,” he said, glancing up from his phone, then gunning the bike’s engine and weaving between two red double-decker buses caked with dust, heavy with passengers, lopsided from their loads. “We’ll figure it out when we get there.”

The word *we* sent a flash of hope through Indy, a ripple of relief that maybe he believed her now, that maybe they were on the same side now, that maybe—

Indy cut off that glimmer of hope when Ice took a hard turn and she felt the stiff plastic ties cut into her wrists. Don't get ahead of yourself, you silly goose, she warned herself angrily. He's the problem right now, not the solution. The only reason he hasn't already broken your neck and tossed you in the Mumbai sewers is because he thinks you know something.

So what happens if you do in fact convince Ice that you know nothing at all, Indy wondered as paranoia and panic rose up in her like a two-headed dragon ripping through her insides, churning them into chaos and confusion.

Does he just let you go then? A shrug and a half-assed apology before sending you on your merry way?

Or does he get the order to “clean up this mess” anyway, get rid of Indy just in case she makes an indignant fuss, files complaints and reports, maybe even goes to the press so the world knows how a woman is treated in the CIA?

Now Indy was *really* turned around, not sure whom to trust, certain she couldn't trust the totally irrational feeling of safety that she'd gotten from Ice, was still getting from being

this close to his big warm body, burrowed into his back like a rabbit on the run.

Then Indy's anxiety ratcheted up again when Ice turned off the busy main road, rumbled down a side street, pulled into an empty slot in a row of scooters and motorcycles parked haphazardly outside a dumpy three-story office building.

Ice planted his big boots on the uneven ground on either side of the bike to stabilize it, then killed the engine.

“Why ... why have we stopped here?” Indy asked, glancing up at the ugly office building with blue-glass windows set into beige plaster streaked black from mold. “Is this another safe-house or something?”

Ice said nothing. He looked down along his body, towards where her hands were tied around his abdomen.

He grabbed her wrists and pulled them apart, snapping the thick plastic tie like it was a ribbon. The plastic cut into her wrists, but Ice had placed his hands around them in a way that absorbed most of the force.

Indy pulled her arms back into her body, rubbed her sore wrists. There were dark red marks on her light brown skin, but



the skin wasn't broken. Once again, just enough to make it sting without causing any real damage.

He was still setting his frame.

Still establishing his dominance.

Still playing his game.

A game that was getting to Indy.

Getting to her in a way she didn't completely understand.

Or maybe she just didn't want to admit it.

Admit that it was working.

“Get off the bike,” Ice ordered, half-turning his head, hands still on the handlebars. “Don't get cute. You try to run, I'll break all the fingers of your left hand.”

Indy leaned to her left so she could reach the ground with one foot. Then she swung her other leg off the bike and stepped away. She patted down her windbreaker, dusted her ass off with her palms. Clouds of white concrete mist came off as she slapped her butt.

“I'm actually a leftie,” Indy said as she watched Ice push the heavy bike onto its stand, wipe his fingerprints off the metal handlebars with his sleeve, then dismount and grab his

duffel from the metal-framed saddlebag. “It would be *so* much more convenient if you broke all the fingers in my *right* hand.”

Ice turned to her, squaring himself like Indy needed a reminder that he was about eleven times her size in every dimension.

“Your convenience isn’t my priority, O’Donnell,” he said in a cold monotone.

“You called me Indy earlier,” she said, hating that his coldness made her heart sink. “I prefer you call me that.”

“Nobody gives a shit about your preferences.” Ice put his shades back on even though the sun was long gone.

Indy took a breath, shook her head. “I see why you’re called Ice. You can just switch it on and off, can’t you? Mostly off, from my limited experience.”

Ice grunted like he didn’t give a shit about her limited experience. He looked around the side street, which of course was about as crowded as Times Square on New Year’s Eve. His shaded gaze fell on a black-and-yellow hatchback taxicab with a grinning driver who was perhaps hoping the foreigner would give him a big tip because he didn’t understand the exchange rate.

“Get in,” Ice commanded, grabbing her upper arm and pulling her towards the cab. He yanked open the back door for her, shoved her inside head-first, then climbed in after her. “Raj Palace Hotel,” he told the driver.

Indy blinked twice as the thrilled driver slammed the car into gear, honked at a cow ambling down the middle of the road, and screeched the little hatchback into traffic.

“The Raj Palace is Mumbai’s fanciest hotel,” Indy whispered as they hit the main road again. “Who’s paying for this?”

Ice unzipped his duffel and held up a transparent plastic baggie with a passport, driver’s license, and an American Express Black card. “John Benson.”

Indy blinked twice more, her mind racing as she thought back to the silver-haired, wolf-eyed man who’d brought her into the CIA almost eight years ago.

“Benson isn’t CIA anymore, last I heard,” she said softly, looking into his shaded eyes. “Which makes you what? A hired gun? Freelance killer? Black ops?”

“All of the above, as far as you’re concerned.” Ice took off his glasses now, cleaning off the lenses with the bottom of his

long-sleeved black tee.

He was about to put them back on, but Indy placed her hand on his arm.

“Don’t,” she said, her breath catching as the contact made her tingle. “Please. Earlier you said *we’ll* figure this out. You called me Indy. I know you’re a good man, Ice. I feel it, and I want us to—”

“Nobody gives a shit about what you want or don’t want,” Ice snapped, shrugging her hand off his arm viciously, slamming his shades back onto his nose with far more force than seemed necessary. “And you don’t know shit about me, O’Donnell. Don’t think you can play me with that *you’re a good man* bullshit. You’re not going to manipulate me with that condescending crap.”

Indy glared at his hidden eyes, then looked down at her hands, rubbed her sore wrists. She glanced back at him, then shrugged.

“Don’t be so sure,” she said softly. “Benson’s already proved that you can be manipulated. He didn’t tell you that he recruited me, that we go way back, did he?”

Ice flinched behind his shades, looked out his side window, said nothing.

“Yeah, we go *way* back,” Indy whispered even though her interaction with John Benson had been only for those months when he’d slowly and methodically recruited her all those years ago.

Indy just wanted to push Ice’s buttons, see if she could crack that cold exterior, get him to flip that internal switch from freezing to fire.

Even though she was somewhat afraid of what a burning-hot Ice would do to her.

“Then maybe Benson’s the one who wants you dead,” Ice said without turning his head in her direction. “After all, it’s not a good look for him if someone he personally recruited turns out to be a traitor to the United States.”

Indy’s heart lurched. “*Traitor? Are you insane? Is everyone insane? Ohmygod, this is a such a big mistake I don’t even know how to fucking process it!*” She gulped back what tasted like bile poisoned by fear. Took a heaving breath to calm herself enough to speak coherently. “What does Benson think I’ve done?”

“You know what you’ve done and so do we.” Ice’s face was still turned into the warm breeze blowing through the open window. “All we want from you is the name of the higher-up who got you access to classified data that’s way above your clearance level.”

Indy shook her head like a dog at the beach, smiling like a crazy person as she did it, wishing wildly that she’d hit her head at the gym and this was all a bad dream, a horrible hallucination, a nasty nightmare.

“Benson’s wrong, and so are you,” she managed to say with more firmness than she felt. Her certainty calmed her down just enough to think it through. She looked up, cocked her head, widened her eyes. “But if there’s real evidence against me, then I’m being set up. Used as a cover for someone else. A patsy to take the fall for whatever’s happening.”

Now it all came to her in a rush, hitting her so hard she almost threw up from the dreadful excitement.

“Ohmygod, you *know* how the CIA works, Ice,” she pleaded. “They’ve got schemes hidden inside plans wrapped around conspiracies packaged with lies. You need to show me

the evidence so I can help figure out who's behind this. Look at me, Ice. Fucking *look* at me!"

Now Indy lost her cool at Ice's aloof coldness. With a quickness fueled by rage she snatched the shades off his face, broke the plastic frame in two, then tossed the bits out the taxi window with a satisfied little shriek that made it clear she was coming undone, losing her damn mind, going certifiably mad, definitely deranged.

When she clawed her consciousness back to the real world Ice was staring at her with those green eyes.

Burning green eyes.

She'd flipped that switch in him.

Turned him from cold to hot, freezing to boiling, ice to fire.

The taxi driver was peering wide-eyed into the rearview mirror at them, and Indy figured that was the only reason Ice didn't break her in two like she'd done to his shades.

"There are going to be consequences for that," Ice snarled under his breath, his fists clenched by his sides like he was trying damn hard to keep his hands to himself right now, to not

put them on her throat and squeeze, not put them on her ass and spank.

Indy cackled out a manic laugh, realizing that Ice wouldn't hurt her with the taxi driver watching. She was immune and invincible! Unstoppable and untouchable!

For now, at least.

He'd said there would be consequences later, but she'd cross that bridge when she came to it.

So Indy kept at it.

Kept at *him*.

She kept at him with everything she had, pleading her case with all the emotion she could find in herself, moving close to him and grabbing his arm, reaching up and turning his head when he tried to look away from her.

Ice was clearly thrown off balance by Indy's antics, and so she kept going, kept pushing. She could feel switches being flipped inside herself as she alternated between verbal battery and physical cajoling, going from pleading to protesting one moment, moving from fearful to furious another, playing every emotional angle she could find, firing every logical weapon she could discharge, imploring and impeaching, explaining



and exploding, moving close to him so her breasts brushed against his arm, touching his face so he'd look at her, leaning towards him so he'd smell her, planting herself firmly in front of his damn face so he'd see her, see nothing but her, see her inside and outside.

See her for what she was.

A woman telling the truth.

A woman begging for help.

A woman asking for trust.

His trust.

Ice didn't trust himself around her. He sat silent like a statue as Indy pleaded her case. He missed his sunglasses, was pissed she'd broken them and tossed the pieces out the window.

She'd moved fast to snatch them off his face. Caught him by surprise. Another sign that Ice wasn't all the way back in the game just yet. Still rusty from being out of the field for two years.

It had to be that, Ice told himself as Indy pulled on his arm to get him to turn to her, to get him to look at her.

Ice glanced at the rearview mirror, saw the taxi driver staring. Shit, what was he thinking getting into a damn taxi with a woman who was supposed to be his captive. Sure, a tall white guy boosting a car in the middle of a crowded Mumbai street would attract attention, so that wouldn't have been a good idea. But surely Ice could have stuck with the motorcycle a bit longer, ditched it closer to the hotel. There was no transponder or any high-tech tracking device on this old-school bike. If anyone wanted to track it, good luck finding a single motorcycle in a sea of traffic crawling through one of the world's largest cities.

It was only when Indy pulled on his shirt to get his attention again that Ice admitted why he'd ditched that bike.

Her body pressed up against him from behind had been fucking with his head.

Her scent moving through his breath had been messing with his calm.

Just like her borderline ridiculous histrionics right now were getting under his skin, her earnest pleas adding to that first impression he'd gotten that this woman was telling the truth not lies, was clean not dirty, was his to protect not put down.

But Ice shoved the thoughts away. Right now he couldn't trust Benson. Couldn't trust himself. So how the hell could he allow himself to trust *her*?

Even though in a strange way, she might be the only one Ice *could* trust right now.

The only one sending a clear signal that she was *exactly* what she claimed to be.

A pawn.

A patsy.

A victim.

Indy reached out and playfully tried to turn his face towards her, and Ice grabbed her wrist and held tight, twisting just enough to send a message but not enough that she'd cry out in pain.

“I warned you not to fuck with me,” Ice growled under his breath, keeping his voice low enough that the taxi driver—who hopefully did not speak English—wouldn't hear. “You paw at me again and I will break all your damn fingers.”

Indy glanced at the taxi driver's reflection. The man quickly looked away. Then she gazed into Ice's eyes, sending a tremor through his tensed-up body, a throb through his filled-out cock, a shudder through his tightened-up balls.

“All I have to do is scream and it's game over for you,” Indy said, smiling with exaggerated sweetness. a triumphant glint in her dark eyes. “But surely you must have known that. So why did you shove me into a taxi instead of stealing a car? A Delta guy like you can probably boost any make of car with your eyes closed. Which means that you trust me. You *know* I'm clean. You *know* I'm telling the truth.”

Ice kept his grip tight on her wrist, shook his head coolly even though he was burning up inside from the hot flame of truth in her words. “Can't boost a car on streets this crowded

when you're a big white guy and highly noticeable. And with traffic this bad, the cops would catch up with me and it would turn into a damn mess. Besides, you scream and this poor taxi driver will freak the hell out, stop the cab, go running for his damn life rather than get involved." He snorted, his gaze relaxing. "And finally, you *won't* scream because you know that you're safer with me than out there on your own. Those men were after *your* ass, not mine. Just remember that before you make your next move. Instead of wasting your energy trying to convince me to trust you, think about who in the world *you* can trust right now, O'Donnell."

Indy blinked twice, swallowed once, her face paling, her shoulders slumping.

Ice let go of Indy's wrist, turned his face away from her, gazed out the window, just about holding back a smirk.

Nah, she wasn't going to scream for help. Not here and not at the hotel. She was dead out of options and she damn well knew it. If the CIA just sent a wet team to put her down, no way she could go back to the Embassy or get in touch with Moses or call anyone at Langley.

She was all alone in the world right now.

Which meant Ice was in total control.

He'd broken her without having to snap any of those pretty fingers.

Ice still had it.

He was still a master of the game.

Indy was silent in the seat beside him, her shoulders still slumped. Ice relaxed, decided to enjoy the ride. She was done. Defeated. She'd submitted, just like they all did. He'd get her to the hotel, put her in a room, and she'd start singing like a canary in a coalmine.

But just as Ice pondered whether canary in a coalmine was the appropriate metaphor, his serenity was shattered by a scream.

He whipped his head towards the sound, saw the gleam in Indy's eyes as she wailed like a cat being throttled, looking right at Ice as she did it, like she was doing it just to prove a point, just to show him that he *wasn't* in total control.

The taxi driver slammed on the brakes, his eyes wild with panic. The taxi ground to a halt in the middle of traffic. Immediately horns began to blare, cars began to move around them, bikes and scooters zipped past them, the drivers and riders glaring at the taxi driver as they went past. It was dark

outside, the air filled with exhaust fumes, headlamps and streetlights casting beams of hazy multicolored light that added to the confusion.

It was too chaotic for Indy's screams to register with anyone besides the poor taxi driver, who was shouting words Ice didn't understand, like the driver wasn't sure what the hell to do, panicking partly because of the sound and partly because Ice wasn't even touching the woman who was howling like a tortured mongrel.

Then suddenly Indy stopped screaming. She did it abruptly, going from panic to calm in zero seconds flat, like she was either crazy like a fox or just plain crazy.

"*Mazaak hai,*" she said to the petrified taxi driver. "It's just a game we play in America. Like a joke. Carry on. *Challo.*"

The driver stared in shocked silence, then forced a smile, nodded in earnest relief, and started the engine back up again. Seconds later they were moving, and Indy leaned back in her seat, folded her arms over her slight chest, glanced at Ice with a smug smirk of satisfaction.

"What the hell?" Ice growled, shaking his head, not sure whether to explode with anger or let loose the laughter bubbling up in his chest.

Because clearly this woman was playing her own game. She understood damn well that right now she was better off with Ice than without him. After all, he'd saved her ass back at the safe-house, which meant he might be the only person in her world who *didn't* want her dead—not immediately, at least.

No, she wasn't going to run. That's why she hadn't even *tried* to open the door and make a break for it when the cab stopped.

Which meant she'd only screamed because Ice had smugly pointed out that she *wouldn't* scream.

She was trying to break Ice's frame.

Trying to thwart his efforts to establish dominance.

Spitting and snarling before submitting.

Just the way Ice liked it.

“You liked that?” Indy whispered to him through the turgid air between them. “I took a class in dramatic theatrical performance at Yale.”

“Very impressive,” Ice hissed back at her through his teeth. “Not the performance, but the decision.” He shook his head, gazed darkly in her direction, hoping to hell his eyes wouldn't betray what he really wanted to do to her in that hotel room,



how he was *this* fucking close to giving himself permission to make her submit in the way his body craved right now, craved in a way it never had, not for any woman, not like this, never like this. “This isn’t a fucking game, O’Donnell. You’re a hunted woman. It could be your partner or Benson or even Kaiser who sent in that wet team, which means the CIA may have already decided they don’t give a shit about who you’re covering for. They just want you gone. Erased. Wiped out. Whether you’re innocent or guilty, I am your only shot at living through this. So do *not* fuck with me again. This is your final warning. You pull that shit again and I walk.”

“You won’t walk,” Indy said softly, gazing at him with more warmth than Ice could handle right now without burning up from the ferocious heat raging through his body. “You’re a good man and you have a sense of justice. You know I’m innocent. You know I’m out of options. You know I’ve served my country just like you. So you won’t walk, Ice. I know it in my heart. And you know it in your heart too.” She swallowed, touched her hair, blinked up at him. “I ... I heard it in your heart.”

Ice frowned. “*Heard* it in my heart?”

Indy nodded. “When I was pressed against your back on the motorcycle. I heard your heart beat.” She flashed a smile, her smooth cheeks darkening with a brief splash of color. “Fast. Furious. Frantic. Not the kind of heartbeat one would expect from a guy who calls himself Ice.”

Ice swallowed hard. Everything about this woman screamed for him to believe her, to trust her, to help her, protect her. But there was a clear physical attraction that Ice knew could be scrambling his signals. He needed to be careful.

But he also needed to be balanced.

Because if Indy really was innocent, then she was right about one thing, that was for damn sure:

She deserved justice.

She deserved protection.

She deserved to be safe.

And the only way to know for sure if Indy was innocent was to stick with her.

Which meant Ice wasn't walking away.

Not now.

Maybe not ever.

## **CIA HEADQUARTERS.**

### **LANGLEY, VIRGINIA.**

“You *ever* put one of my guys in danger like that again and I swear to hell, I will shoot you where you sit, right in the middle of CIA Headquarters!”

John Benson stormed into Martin Kaiser’s office, breathing hard from the rage surging through his body. He was relieved they’d taken his Smith and Wesson 9mm at Security Check, now that Benson wasn’t officially CIA. He would have been *this* fucking close to sticking the gun in his old friend’s face just to remind the CIA Director of what it felt like to be one trigger-pull away from hell.

Kaiser whipped around in his swivel chair, his eyebrows raised, black cell phone held slightly away from his ear. He blinked twice, then placed the phone flat on the desk and tapped the screen.

“Speak of the devil,” Kaiser said into the phone with a sigh. “Benson just walked in unannounced, Senator. I’ve got you on speaker. You can tell him what you just told me, so he doesn’t think I’m bullshitting him. It appears John’s not in a very trusting mood right now.”

Benson swallowed the vicious wisecrack that tried to leap out of his throat. He strode over to Kaiser’s big walnut desk, glared at his old colleague, then forced a long exhale and glanced at the phone.

“Hear what directly?” Benson guessed it was Senator Marcus Robinson on the line. Kaiser had been communicating with him directly for some time now—not just because Diego Vargas might be on the loose and gunning for the Senator but also because Robinson was now the Head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, a powerful position that had once been occupied by the late Senator Dean Morgan.

Dean Morgan’s death had in a way kicked off the entire Darkwater thing with Ax and Amy’s mission, and Benson brushed away the sickening thought of what would happen if Senator Robinson and his wife Princess Delilah ended up as casualties of another Darkwater mission.

He couldn’t let that happen.

Because Senator Marcus Robinson needed to be the next President of the United States.

Kaiser and Benson had already made a private promise to do whatever was in their power to make that happen.

Robinson and his wife Delilah were two remarkable Americans of strong character and breathtaking vision, and Benson sensed it was part of his own destiny to make sure those two got to the White House.

“How are you, Benson?” came Robinson’s booming voice, almost vibrating the heavy desk with its resonance. “What’s this about Kaiser putting one of your guys in danger? We’re all on the same side here, last time I checked.”

The Senator wasn’t a big man, but he could move mountains with his voice, maybe move the earth with his words. Sure as hell move America to a better place, put Benson’s beloved country back on the path to where it would once again be a beacon of truth and justice to the world, a force for the Good and the Right.

After all, even a country had its own destiny.

“It’s nothing,” said Benson gruffly, glaring at Kaiser one more time before forcing himself to relax long enough to

finish this phone call. “How’s the extra Darkwater security working out for you and the family?”

The Senator cleared his throat. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk about.” He paused, took a breath. “Delilah and I both appreciate the concern, but—”

“But nothing,” Benson said with a quickness just short of rude. He took a breath, brought his anger at Kaiser back under control, then exhaled slowly. “Look, Senator, when you win the primary and become the nominee you’ll get full Secret Service protection—maybe even earlier if the Service agrees to classify you as a major candidate under threat. But until then, I want Darkwater involved. Diego Vargas is smart, resourceful, and committed. He started off with the Mexican Navy Special Forces. This isn’t some two-bit gangbanger, Senator. This is a serious man with serious skills. Not to mention serious connections on both sides of the border.” He took another breath, sighed it out. Darkwater had just brought on several new guys, men who hadn’t found their missions yet, were still unproven compared to Ax and Bruiser and Cody and the rest all the way up to Hogan. “Is there a problem with the new guys I asked to watch your house? I can swap them out.”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Robinson said hurriedly. “They keep their distance, are very discreet, very respectful. Delilah and the kids definitely feel safer with them around. Me too. It’s just that ... well, there are rumors about Darkwater filtering through the military community. Couple of my regular security detail are former Army. There’s some talk going around, and I don’t want it to get out of hand. You get what I’m saying, right?” He sighed into the phone and said nothing else, but the message came through loud and clear.

“Roger that,” Benson said tightly. “There are rumors that Darkwater is run by a wacko, and it’s best if the next President of the United States isn’t publicly associated with nutcases. Message received, Senator. I’ll pull Keller and Jack away from the house. Tell them to station themselves at a distance.”

“I’d rather you pulled them off completely,” said Robinson with quiet authority, his firmness making Benson bristle. “I’ve got a solid security team. Kaiser says he’ll add a few CIA guys in civvies to the detail. We’ve taken your advice and put bulletproof glass on our townhouse windows. And even if the Secret Service doesn’t approve protection right now, the primaries will be done in a couple of months. Once that happens, we’re safe like sardines in a tin. Either I’ll be the

nominee and will get full Secret Service protection, or I'll have lost and Diego Vargas—if it really was him on the *Rivington*—will no longer give a damn about me.”

Benson grunted a reluctant assent, his feathers still a bit ruffled from the clear message that Robinson considered it a liability to be associated with Darkwater, now that “rumors” were spreading through the military community. He wanted to poke the bear and ask what Robinson himself believed about Darkwater, but decided it was better to stand down. Right now perception and reputation mattered more than anything for Robinson. He was right to want to keep his distance from an off-the-books group that was gathering far more notoriety than Benson liked.

Kaiser finished up with the Senator, then tapped off the phone and glanced up at Benson. “You were borderline rude to the Senator. He’s going to be the next President. You need to tread lightly, stop taking things so damn personally.”

Benson ran his hand through his silver hair, then dragged a straight-backed wooden chair over from by the wall. He sat down hard, stared at Kaiser even harder.

“Hard not to take it personally when the Senator calls *you* to pass on a message to *me*.” Benson folded his arms over his



chest. “He has my number. I didn’t see a missed call from Marcus Robinson.”

Kaiser chuckled. “Are you jealous, John? If it makes you feel better, Robinson called about something else. Pulling the Darkwater guys off was just an aside. He was going to call you, but I told him I’d pass on the message.” Kaiser leaned back in his swivel chair, crossed one leg over the other knee, tented his fingers and shot a pointed glance at Benson. “After all, I know you’re busy running your little matchmaking games with the Darkwater Dating Agency.”

Benson’s jaw tightened at the jab. “I’m sitting down now, but don’t assume I won’t lean over that desk and hit you in the face. You sent in a wet team even though I fucking *told* you Ice was going in, that he’d handle it.”

Kaiser blinked twice. “Someone sent a wet team to the Mumbai safe-house?”

Benson’s jaw tightened to where he could feel the pressure behind his ears. Kaiser was more than capable of sending in a team behind Benson’s back—in fact he’d done something dangerously close to that on the Cody-and-Cate mission. But that was years ago now, and Kaiser had slowly come around to grudgingly admitting that Darkwater had developed a useful

pattern of putting down some seriously bad motherfuckers—albeit in wildly unconventional missions.

Benson said nothing for a long moment. He watched Martin Kaiser's eyes. Kaiser could beat a lie-detector nine times out of ten. But Benson's internal lie detector was foolproof when it came to his old friend.

Forty-three seconds of silence and Benson blinked, grunted, then sighed. "If it wasn't you, then Indy O'Donnell is already blown. Her contact already knows we're onto her."

Kaiser stroked his chin. "She must have told him about the meeting with Moses. He must have figured it was best to silence her ASAP."

"Or he's got access to O'Donnell's secure phone and saw the messages from Moses about the safe-house." Benson paused a beat. "Maybe without her knowing."

Kaiser snorted. "You think O'Donnell is being set up? Grow up, John. You just can't admit you made a mistake recruiting her."

Benson ignored the remark. "The only evidence we have on O'Donnell are encrypted files sent from her phone. But

there's no electronic trail leading back to *how* those files got to her.”

“So what?”

“So if whoever she's working for could cover his tracks getting classified files *to* O'Donnell, surely he'd be able to also hide all traces of those files being sent *from* O'Donnell's phone to the Chinese and the Indians and the Pakistanis. The fact that we picked those up in a routine audit doesn't fit.”

Kaiser rubbed his eyes and nodded tightly. “You're saying our guy in the shadows *wanted* us to find those send-records on O'Donnell's phone.”

Benson shrugged. “That would make sense if it's a set up.”

Kaiser thought a moment, then shook his head. “But if he wants to set up O'Donnell, why send a wet team after her when he sees that we're onto her? A set up means he *wants* us onto her. The wet team proves it's *not* a setup. It proves O'Donnell isn't working alone, that someone else wants to eliminate her. It exposes the guy. The right move would have been for him to just hang back, stay hidden, let O'Donnell take the fall. Doesn't make sense. Sorry, John. O'Donnell is dirty. Our guy is worried she'll give him up. He wants her dead ASAP.”

Benson stroked his chin, glanced at the ceiling, then back at Kaiser. “Then he would have warned that Indian wet-team about Ice. But he didn’t.”

Kaiser shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t know. He can’t get into my secure line. He wouldn’t know I called you.”

Benson grunted, shook his head. “He’d have known you called *someone*. He knew Moses was taking her to that safe-house and that you were sending someone to meet them there. And he could very well have been listening in via Moses’s phone, heard Ice and Moses talk, heard my name being mentioned, figured you’d called in Darkwater.” Benson paused a beat, blinked as something occurred to him. “But he didn’t warn that Indian wet team that they might face resistance. I was listening on Ice’s phone. Those guys thought he was Moses.” His jaw tightened as the answer hit hard. “Shit, the guy *wanted* it to turn into a firefight! This isn’t about O’Donnell, Martin. It’s about *you!*”

Kaiser blinked twice, exhaled hard, his face darkening but not with surprise. Benson could see that the idea had already occurred to Kaiser. “To make me look incompetent. Like I’ve got a traitor on my watch and I’m trying to cover my ass by taking her out quietly. So he sent that wet-team in precisely to

create a mess. He wasn't expecting me to call you. He must have scrambled to get that wet-team mobilized at the last minute, once he heard Ice say your name to Moses. It got him worried that O'Donnell will get taken out quietly by an off-the-books team. *Too* quietly. He didn't want us to pull off a successful cover-up."

Benson smiled tightly. "Exactly. He's improvising now. Calling Darkwater was a wild card and he had to adjust fast. He decided to let it get a bit messy. And sending in a local wet team without warning them about Ice was a good move. It pretty much guaranteed a messy firefight. He didn't care who got killed in the confusion. He just wanted to make it hard for us to keep this O'Donnell thing too quiet. He wants the whole thing to look like a cluster-fuck. Make you look incompetent. Hell, for all we know, he wants to make it look like *you* ordered the wet team to take O'Donnell out before giving her a chance to prove her innocence. We don't know this guy's game yet, Martin. And if he's improvising because he didn't expect Darkwater to get involved, then he could be even more unpredictable, way more dangerous."

Kaiser rubbed his eyes again, mouthed a curse, glanced off to the side, his pale eyes burning a hole in the dark blue wall.

Benson watched him silently. He knew how Kaiser's mind worked. The ruthlessly pragmatic move would be to simply order Ice to put down O'Donnell and get rid of her body ASAP. That would take away the other guy's moves. It would save Kaiser's ass, save his reputation, save his job.

But Benson knew there was still a shred of humanity left in his jaded old friend. Besides, Kaiser could have chosen to just put O'Donnell down without ever calling Benson. That alone told Benson everything he needed to know about Kaiser, about how the cold CIA man was slowly coming around to Benson's view of the world.

You called me because you couldn't ignore my connection with Indy O'Donnell, Benson thought as a ripple of that familiar excitement moved down his spine. You sensed this was the beginning of a new Darkwater mission, didn't you, Martin. You're being pulled into it too, aren't you, old friend.

Maybe it wasn't intentional but subconscious, Benson thought as he watched Kaiser's eyes. Or maybe it was the adoption coming through, Fay's dead sister's twins coming into Kaiser's life, pulling him and his estranged wife Alice back together, pulling them both into their own vortex of that

ancient energy, drawing them back into their own unfinished love story.

Drawing them both into Darkwater.

So Benson waited.

Benson watched.

And then Benson was rewarded.

“All right,” said Kaiser quietly, tapping his lower lip and glancing back at Benson. “Let it play out your way, John. The real target is the guy pulling the strings in the shadows. If you getting involved has thrown him off balance, it’s best that you stay involved. Besides, I have a hundred other things to handle right now.” He rubbed his jaw, took a long breath, exhaled hard. “I’ll give you all the access you need.”

Benson nodded curtly. “I’ll need access to CIA personnel files. Starting with all members of Tech Operations in Langley. Our man would have needed expert tech help to pull this off. I’ve already had my CIA tech guy run through the audit logs to see if anything looks off, but he’s come up with nothing—which means our guy is using a top-level hacker.”

Kaiser’s jaw tightened. “You have a CIA tech guy? Dammit, you aren’t CIA anymore, John. All access needs to

go through me. You need to be careful here. I'm still the damn Director.”

Benson ignored the warning even though he saw a troubling darkness in Kaiser's eyes. The man looked on edge, and not just because of the workload. There were always a hundred things going on for the CIA director. This was more than just that.

“What did Robinson call about?” Benson asked quietly, tabling the Ice-and-Indy question, following a hunch to go down this path instead.

Kaiser shifted in his chair. His light blue eyes darted to the desk drawer, then flicked back up. His fingers tapped restlessly on the leather armrests of his swivel chair. “Doesn't matter.”

Benson cocked his head to the left, raised an eyebrow to the right. “Wait, did you quit smoking?”

Kaiser grunted, then nodded. “The adoption finally came through. The twins are with us at home.”

Benson blinked twice. With Nancy Sullivan gone from Darkwater, he felt disconnected, out of the know, lost in his



own world as the real world turned around him. He rubbed his jaw, nodded, let the smile come through.

“Well, shit,” Benson managed to say when he saw a flicker of something warm and human in Kaiser’s cold eyes. “Does Fay know her niece and nephew are now officially part of the Martin and Alice homestead?”

Kaiser smiled, then nodded. “Fay was over last weekend. Fox came with her.” He paused a beat. “Nancy stopped by too.”

Benson stiffened. He didn’t recall an invitation from Kaiser or Alice inviting him to the weekend party.

“It was a spur of the moment thing,” Kaiser said hurriedly. “Fay and Nancy had been tracking the adoption process, and they showed up to help get the twins settled.” He took a breath, sighed it out. “Alice wanted to call you. After all, you put this whole thing into motion after that mess in Iceland with Fay’s family and the Valley. But Nancy asked Alice not to do it. Said it wasn’t your thing anyway, that you wouldn’t show up so why bother.”

Benson forced a grin even though something stabbed at his heart. He hadn’t spoken to Nancy in months. The last time he’d seen her was at Hogan and Hannah’s wedding in New

Jersey. They'd spoken briefly, and then Benson had made a toast and taken off before the dancing started. Since then Benson had tried calling, but Nancy never picked up. All he'd get were polite text messages in response. Nancy was keeping her distance, probably worried that Benson might lure her back into Darkwater.

Back into the darkness.

"She's probably right," Benson said, faking the nonchalant cheerfulness that usually came easy. "Anyway, I'm happy for you and Alice. And in awe of the commitment the two of you made, giving new lives to infants who had the deck stacked against them even before they were born."

Kaiser nodded, acknowledging the compliment. He was silent a long moment, like perhaps he wanted to say something more but couldn't find the words. Kaiser and Benson were close like brothers, but they were hard men who'd done hard things, made decisions with people's lives at stake, decisions that sometimes turned out bad, choices that would haunt them to their graves and beyond, all in service of some ideal of America they couldn't afford *not* to believe in.

"Ice and Indy," Kaiser said finally. "I presume they made it past the wet team. Or else I'd be sitting here with a broken

nose and you'd be in handcuffs facing assault charges.”

Benson chuckled darkly. “They’re safe for now. I’ve been listening in, and it appears they’ve checked into a Mumbai hotel under a rock-solid Darkwater alias.”

Kaiser grunted. “Which hotel?”

Benson’s eyes narrowed. “I’d rather not say.”

Kaiser snorted. “What, you still think I might be going behind your back on this? Hell, *I* was the one who brought this to *you*, John! You recruited O’Donnell, and I figured you should clean up your own mess.”

Benson snorted back at him. The earlier thought that perhaps Kaiser had been subconsciously drawn to call in Darkwater seemed ludicrous now. “You brought this to me because it suits you to have an off-the-books team handle Indy O’Donnell. I’m doing it because Darkwater owes you some favors for the help you’ve provided.”

“For the cover-ups, you mean? Yeah, no shit Darkwater owes me. But finish this O’Donnell thing clean and you can consider your debt paid off. We’re done after this.”

Benson frowned, a chill racing up his spine, reminding him of that troubling flicker he’d seen in Kaiser’s eyes before

they'd gotten distracted talking about the twins. "Are you cutting ties with me, Martin? Is Langley off-limits for me once the O'Donnell mission is done?"

Kaiser rubbed the back of his head, shifted in his seat. "Hell, Langley might be off-limits for me too, if I don't rein it in." He sighed, shook his head. "Rein *you* in, John. Or cut you off."

Benson's frown cut deeper. "That's what Robinson called about, isn't it? These rumors about Darkwater aren't just hurting *his* reputation. They're hurting yours too."

Kaiser nodded grimly. "Robinson's getting some pressure as head of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Apparently there are some parties who want him to recommend that the current President fire me and appoint a new CIA Director."

Benson took a long breath, huffed it out. Then he shook his head. "Robinson's still in your corner. He can hold his ground until he's in the White House. Then it becomes his call, his choice, his damn decision." He ran his fingers through his hair again, bit his lower lip. "Look, maybe I can talk to Robinson. Take Gale over there with me. She and Delilah are close like sisters. Hell, Gale is the reason Marcus Robinson and Princess

Delilah got together. Gavin and Gale are in London, but one phone call and they'll fly down to DC."

Kaiser shook his head gently. "You still don't get it, John. Darkwater is the problem here. Seven years of insane missions that have left smoking trails of death and destruction. Eight cover-ups and counting. You think the rest of the CIA hasn't figured out that old man Kaiser is using the Agency to clean up after his buddy Benson? You know as well as I do there are ambitious CIA men and women itching to see me gone, waiting for their chance to take the corner office, rise to the top of the stack. And this adoption has got people talking too. We covered up what happened in the Valley from the public, sure. But you can't really hide a cover-up that big from the folks in the shadows. Same with the Diana Jackson thing in Somalia. My enemies have too much ammo against me, John. Robinson's feeling the pressure too, and he wants me to back off, cut ties with Darkwater, kill your access to CIA databases and all that. And Robinson doesn't even know about the O'Donnell thing yet. So yeah, I admit it. I did call you because I want the O'Donnell thing handled quietly, without anyone in the CIA or Senate Intelligence Committee finding out. But you need this just as much as I do. If I'm on thin ice, it means you are too. Darkwater would have been dead in the water after the

first damn mission if I hadn't been there covering your ass. It's the end of the line, John. Indy O'Donnell is the last Darkwater mission, so make it count."

Benson tried to swallow the sickness rising up his throat. He'd worried things were heading in this direction. For a secret group, Darkwater was developing too much of a reputation. On one hand it was a good thing because it drew in the right sort of men from Special Forces, created those vortices of energy that set the great games into motion. But on the other hand it was spiraling out of control, potentially dragging good men like Kaiser and Robinson—and their families—into it as collateral damage.

And Kaiser was right—without his support in the CIA, Darkwater would be seriously compromised.

Just when they were so damn close, Benson thought as he felt the office walls closing in on him. If things played out, Robinson would be President and Delilah would be First Lady, which meant Kaiser and Benson would have a man and woman of like-minded commitment in the damn White House!

What could they all accomplish for America and the world?

What kind of wild missions would the universe spin up for Benson and his merry band of dangerous men and determined women with *that* kind of power standing behind them?

Benson had to find out.

There was no way he could let this go.

No way he could let this end.

This was *his* damn destiny.

It was why Sally had been taken from him.

Why he'd been set free from having to fear for her precious life as he barreled down the dark road to his private destiny.

Sally's death set Benson loose on the world and its darkness, and he wasn't going to let that be for nothing.

Not when they were so damn close.

"We've played power games in the CIA for forty years," Benson reminded his old colleague. "And we destroyed anyone who tried to cross us."

"There is no *we*, John. You left the CIA seven years ago. And yes, I know how to play the damn game. Of course I do. But eventually all great players hit the wall. Maybe it's my

time.” Kaiser took a breath, let it out slow, a hint of wistfulness in the exhale, a bit of melancholy, a touch of yearning. “I’m suddenly a new father again. Alice is back with me. Maybe this is your woo-woo universe sending me a message that it’s time to turn my attention to family and home—two things I ignored the first time around. Maybe I’m getting a second chance. And maybe I need to take it.”

Benson stared, not sure whether to laugh or cry. “That’s a lot of maybes in there.” He rubbed his jaw feverishly, seeking the right words to talk his old buddy back from the edge. Benson knew he was a bastard for doing it, but no way was Kaiser going to be a good husband and father if he turned his back on his own individual destiny to do it.

Besides, Alice had always known that about Martin Kaiser.

Just like every Darkwater woman knew that about her man.

There was no turning away from the violence and the darkness, the shadows and the secrets. It was part of their lives, would walk alongside each couple for eternity, a demon in the darkness waiting for them to drop their guard and think they could switch off those twin engines of sex and violence and just sail away into a calm blue horizon.



There was no calm blue horizon for the Darkwater couples.

That wasn't Darkwater's destiny.

And Kaiser was a Darkwater man too.

He just couldn't admit it out loud.

"All right," Benson said finally, choosing to delay the showdown and focus on Indy and Ice, the real priority for now. "I'll back off after Indy and Ice are squared away."

Kaiser looked hard and long into Benson's eyes. "I'm not sure I want to know what *squared away* means. It's by no means certain she's being set up. It's still far more likely she's dirty. You said they've checked into a hotel? I thought Ice Wagner was a crack Delta interrogator. Is he going to threaten her with room-service and a day at the hotel spa to get her to cough up a name for us?" Kaiser shook his head. "And once she gives up a name, we know she's dirty. And then you know what needs to happen. It's standard procedure for traitors. We don't make exceptions for women traitors, and you damn well know that."

Benson said nothing, holding Kaiser's gaze, trying to stay expressionless and unreadable. He'd put Ice and Indy together,

but it was too early to tell how it would play out. Just because every Darkwater mission had worked out didn't mean shit when it came to the next mission.

In fact, each Darkwater success made it more likely the next one would be a failure. Sooner or later the mathematics of probability would work against Benson, just like Nancy kept reminding him.

So maybe this would be Darkwater's first failed mission.

Either way, failure or success, it was starting to look like this might be Darkwater's *last* mission.

Robinson was already distancing himself.

Kaiser would have to as well if he wanted to keep his job.

Benson sighed silently, forced himself to focus back on the mission. One step at a time, he reminded himself.

And the next step was Indy O'Donnell.

"I don't believe Indy O'Donnell is a traitor. She says she's being set up, and I think Ice believes her." Benson spoke gently, but his eyes were focused and hard. He'd recruited Indy O'Donnell, and as much as it would make Kaiser look bad if she was a traitor, it would not be a good look for Benson either. "But if I'm wrong, I will do what needs to be done. I

know as well as anyone we don't make exceptions for women traitors."

"Great, but does Ice Wagner know that? Word is he and his brother fell apart watching their parents get wrecked by that fucking disease. You better make damn sure he follows the facts, not his cock." Kaiser huffed out a breath. "Or his damn *heart*, heaven forbid."

Benson flashed a grin. Kaiser's dismissive sarcasm was still there, but it wasn't as sharp now as it had been even a year ago. Maybe becoming a new father and getting his wife back thanks to Darkwater was chipping away at his belief system.

Good, because Benson had until the end of this mission to convince both Kaiser and Robinson to keep Darkwater in the game.

"Ice is as good as his name. Cold and hard." Benson slid out his phone from his jacket pocket. He checked the tracker marking Ice's location via his Darkwater phone. Still at the Raj Palace Hotel in South Mumbai. "He won't melt because some woman bats her lashes at him. If O'Donnell is dirty, he'll sniff it out." Benson took a breath, let it out hard. "And if he balks at pulling the trigger, then I'll send in a wet team myself." He paused a beat, looked dead on into Kaiser's eyes. "But if it

looks like she's being set up to be a patsy, then we need to do right by her."

Kaiser sighed. The desk phone rang. He ignored it. Took a breath and let it out slow. "Fair enough." He shook his head, rubbed his eyes again. "You really think someone's setting O'Donnell up as a traitor just to make *me* look bad?"

Benson shrugged. "Maybe to make *both* of us look bad. I recruited O'Donnell. And she's part of your CIA. You said there are people trying to use your connection with me to bring you down. Something like this gets out and it could be the nail in the coffin. Imagine if Robinson gets wind that not only does the CIA have a traitor on your watch but your off-the-books buddy Benson recruited her when he was CIA and then you asked Benson to help take her out quietly. It's shady at best, disastrous at worst."

Kaiser scratched the side of his head. Benson could tell he was jonesing for a cigarette. But there wasn't even the hint of cigarette smoke in the sterile air of the office. Kaiser was making good on his promise to quit. He was taking this new-father business seriously.

Benson leaned forward in his chair. "All right, play this out with me, Martin. We already know someone higher up in the

Agency is involved. Regardless of whether O'Donnell is a patsy or a traitor. No other way she could get that kind of clearance without any electronic trail in the system. Agreed?"

Kaiser sighed, then nodded. "Go on."

Benson grinned, feeling that old excitement bubbling up in him, sensing it rise up in Kaiser too. They both loved the game—even though each man played it his own way.

"So let's say O'Donnell is being set up and the motive is to get you fired. Who benefits from that? Who's next in line for your job, Martin? You drop dead right now and who gets your corner office?"

Kaiser frowned. "Well, there are deputy and assistant directors who will step in immediately to make sure the Agency runs smoothly. Bill Morris would become interim Director until the President and Congress confirm his permanent appointment." He chuckled. "But if you think Bill Morris set up Indy O'Donnell to bring me down, then—"

Benson swiped away the suggestion. "Bill Morris is a solid player but he's a pinch-hitter at best. He's ten years older than you, well past retirement age. He would just warm your seat until the President names a new Director." Benson sat back now, his head buzzing with the thrill of a new game afoot.

“How would the current President choose a new CIA Director?”

Kaiser shrugged. “He’d ask his cabinet for recommendations.”

“Sure, but he’d also ask the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Which happens to be Senator Robinson. And Robinson’s recommendation would carry a lot of weight. Maybe even *all* the weight.”

“What’s your point? If I’m gone, Robinson isn’t going to toss *your* name into the hat, if that’s what you’re hoping, John.”

Benson laughed like a coyote after a kill. “That hurts, Martin. But seriously, you and Robinson seem to be best buds now. Who *would* he recommend if you were out of the picture?”

Kaiser stroked his chin, tapped his lower lip, then rocked gently in his swivel chair, his eyes shining. “Rhett Rodgers.”

“Rhett? The NOC deep cover guy?” Benson blinked once, swallowed twice, almost smacked the side of his head to make sure he was hearing right. “I’ve been out of the CIA for seven years, so maybe I missed something. But there is absolutely no

way Rhett Rodgers is even in *consideration* for the job, let alone the fucking front-runner!”

Kaiser’s eyebrows went up briefly, his head tilted to the side, eyes narrowing into a suspicious frown. “Why would you say that? Rhett spent twenty-three years working Europe from the shadows as a Non-Official Cover operator, back when the NOC program was in full-swing. Bill Morris handled him for years, vouches for Rhett completely, swears the guy was stellar as an undercover man and provocateur. Rhett worked behind the scenes to topple political parties and even governments all over Eastern Europe and North Africa. Sure, he never worked at Langley before Bill brought him in seven years ago, didn’t have the connections to play the office-politics game all that time undercover. But he’s made up for it since then. He’s sharp, smooth, polished. Robinson likes him.”

Benson tried to swallow but his throat was dry. “So Rhett Rodgers is back in the United States?”

Kaiser’s eyes narrowed to slits. “What aren’t you telling me, John? What’s your connection to Rhett Rodgers? I don’t remember his name popping up in any significant way on our rise together. You never worked directly with him, far as I

know. He was an NOC ghost. Deep undercover in Europe most of the time.”

Benson said nothing. His head was buzzing hard now.

Of course the name hadn't popped up all those years ago.

Because Benson had always made damn sure he never brought up the name around Kaiser.

Of course, Rhett's name had sure as hell come to mind the moment Kaiser called about the Indy O'Donnell thing. How could it not?

Still, Benson couldn't actually believe the name was coming up *again*.

Coming up as the man with the primary motive to get Kaiser forced out of the Director's chair.

Was it one of those coincidences that actually was just random chance, meaningless and irrelevant?

Or was it a sign that seeds Benson had planted decades ago were coming to fruition in a way that might destroy them all.

Kaiser asked the question again, but Benson shrugged it off and stood to leave. He couldn't open the Pandora's box of Rhett Rodgers right now.



After all, Rhett wasn't the only secret locked in that dark vault to which Indy O'Donnell was the key.

No, Rhett wasn't the only skeleton in that closet.

There was a Scarlet too.

Rhett. Scarlet.

And India.

Shit, Benson thought as panic streaked through his body. Thirty years ago he'd still been a young man, cocky as hell but ignorant of how choices tended to chase you down, pounce on you just when you thought you were safe.

Benson swallowed thickly, forced away the rising panic, telling himself there was no way, absolutely not, this couldn't go there, wouldn't go there.

But with Rhett Rodgers in the picture, it had already gone part of the way there, and now Benson had to deal with it.

But how?

There were still so many unknowns. So many damn questions.

Did Rhett Rodgers have the complete picture?

Did Rhett Rogers understand what he was doing?

And most of all, did Rhett Rodgers know to whom he was doing it?

“Why are you doing this to me?”

Indy huffed out a hot breath. It was sweltering in the hotel room, mostly because the windows didn't open and Ice had turned off the air-conditioning the moment they'd walked in.

Beads of sweat rolled down Indy's forehead. It had been a rough day, and she was drained. Her throat was dry from dehydration, the thirst making her gut clench. She whooshed out another breath and glared at the new set of plastic ties binding her wrists together. Then she glared at Ice, who was coolly unpacking his duffel, which appeared to contain an inordinate number of neatly folded black tee shirts and black cargo pants and black boxer-briefs and black socks.

And, oh yes, black sunglasses.

“You have *got* to be kidding,” Indy blurted out when Ice put on a fresh set of black-tinted Wayfarers and shot a harsh look at her, like he was still pissed that she'd snapped his other pair in two and tossed it out the taxi window. “It's nine at night and we're in a hotel room with the curtains drawn shut.”

Ice stacked the last of his black tee shirts on the closet shelf, lined the stack flush against the wooden side of the open closet, then turned to her, gesturing with his head towards the overhead lights as he emerged from the open bedroom door of the rather fancy hotel suite.

“These LED lights are killer on the eyes.” Ice strolled past the tied-up Indy and yanked open the mini-bar fridge—which in fact was quite large, not a mini-fridge at all. “Oh, hey, you thirsty?”

He pulled out two chilled bottles of water, placed one on the sideboard beneath the TV, cracked open the other bottle, and glugged down the delicious-looking cold water as beads of moisture formed on the light blue plastic. He finished the first bottle, tossed the empty into the metal waste-basket, then grabbed the second bottle and proceeded to repeat the process until it was gone too.

“Man, that’s good,” he said after disposing of the tragically empty second bottle of spring water that made Indy yearn for the snow-capped mountains of the Himalayas, where ice-cold water was in glorious abundance and thirst was not a word, yearning was not a sensation, dehydration was not a leading cause of death.

“Um, I’d like one of those, please.” Indy pointed towards the fridge with a clumsy two-handed gesture because her wrists were bound together. “But don’t trouble yourself. I’ll get it.”

She stood from the hard-cushioned sofa and tried to make her way towards the fridge herself. It was slow going because of the second set of plastic ties binding her ankles together. The best she could manage was a sort of clumsy bunny-hop that made her vaguely grateful she didn’t have big boobs because she’d now have two black eyes.

Ice leaned against the sideboard, crossing his arms over his chest, those dark-hidden eyes watching her struggle like a pig in a poke. She’d just about gotten to the fridge when he pushed himself off the sideboard, strolled towards her, grabbed her by the scruff of her shirt, and tossed her back into the sofa.

Indy stumbled from the momentum, but Ice’s aim was true and she landed sideways on the sofa, nothing hurt but her sense of dignity.

She righted herself and sighed in his direction. “Really? You’re still playing this game of dominance and deprivation? What’s next, Chinese Water Torture?”

“You wish.” Ice lazily reached out his long right arm and pulled open the fridge door. He opened it all the way wide, displaying the alluring insides with racks full of chilled water and icy-cold beverages. He pulled out another bottle of water, placed it on the sideboard directly in front of her, then kicked the fridge-door shut with a sudden violence that made Indy jump.

Indy reddened, hating that Ice had made her jump like a scared rabbit. But she also couldn't help admire his perfectly played game of contrast and contradiction, push and pull, gentleness and danger. His lazy movements lulled her. Then the sudden violent kick at the fridge-door triggered all her body's alarm bells.

Every damn one of them.

He was playing her, and he was doing it so well she almost didn't want it to stop.

But it had been hours since she'd had a drink. The stress and action of the day had drained her. The heat and humidity of the stuffy hotel room didn't help.

Neither did this other kind of hotness.

This other kind of wetness.

“I thought you believed me.” Indy tried not to sound sulky, but she did her best to put just enough emotion in the words that it might get to him. “I’m being set up and you know it. It’s not right to tie me up and deprive me of basic human rights. You have a sense of justice. I know it. How is this fair?”

Ice said nothing. Instead he ran his finger along the side of the water-bottle, gathering up the beads of moisture rolling down the cold plastic.

Then he ambled over to her, that wet finger glistening under the overhead lights.

Indy stared in shocked silence as the big man stopped inches away from her body, his heavily muscled frame blocking out most of the light and all of the view.

Now all she could see was that thick finger dripping with wetness.

He held out his arm over her head, drawing her gaze up along with it like she was totally under his control. Indy’s tongue darted out and back. She licked her dry lips, stretched her neck back, opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue, shamelessly begging for a drop of that precious water.

Ice slowly inclined his finger down at her. A drop of the wetness rolled down to his fingertip, hanging on the edge but not dropping, just dangling there like a ripe cherry on a tree, a glistening pearl teetering on the edge of the known universe, its bulbous body catching the light and sending a glint of temptation Indy's way.

The temptation wasn't just thirst but something that had been building all day, from when he'd burst into that safe-house and brought Indy to her knees, from when her crotch was pressed tight against his muscled ass as the throbbing pistons of the motorcycle pumped between her warm legs, the four-stroke engine rumbled beneath her wet pussy.

No, it wasn't just simple thirst, and suddenly Indy couldn't take it anymore and with a sudden lurch she raised her body off the sofa and took his thick finger all the way into her mouth and sucked the water off it like a deranged addict lusting after her drug.

Ice yanked his finger out of her mouth and quickly stepped back. Indy gasped and swallowed, suddenly aware of what she'd done without consciously meaning to do it, without really knowing she'd done it.



She stared up at Ice, then gasped again when her gaze moved from his saliva-coated finger down along his heavy frame to that bulge straining at the fork of his combat pants. For one wild moment Indy imagined Ice striding back over to her, that bulge front and center, right up against her face.

She wondered if this could be her weapon, her way under his skin.

After all, it wouldn't be the first time a spy had used her sexuality to get what she wanted.

What she needed.

What she craved.

Ice turned from her now, walking stiffly back to his spot across the room against the sideboard. Indy's heart hammered behind her boobs. She couldn't understand what had come over her, but it appeared to have come over Ice as well.

There was no doubt the big hard man was big and hard right now.

Hard for her?

Or was it just the feeling of dominance and power that got this big brute going.

He stared at her brutally. "You do that again and I'll—"

“Yeah, I know,” Indy snapped, her voice peaked with self-consciousness, high-pitched with embarrassment. “You’ll break my fingers. Pull out my tongue. Drag me across the room by my hair.”

Ice grunted. “Those are all excellent suggestions.” He glanced at the bottle of water on the sideboard, then back at her. “Here’s what we’ll do. For every question you answer truthfully, you get a drink.” He tapped the cleft on his chin with the same finger Indy had just sucked on like a thirsty little slut. “Directly from the bottle. I’m not going to risk losing a finger to those gaping maws.”

Indy’s maw gaped with indignant fury. “Did you just say I have a big mouth?”

Ice rubbed the back of his neck. “Remember who’s asking the questions. Hint—It’s not you.”

Indy rolled her eyes. “Whatever. I’ve already told you the damn truth. I know you believe me. I saw it in your eyes before you covered up with those ridiculous shades. They don’t even match the shape of your face, by the way. You should be wearing Aviators, not Wayfarers.”

Ice cocked his head like someone had just slapped him across the face. Indy cursed under her breath, bit down hard on

her tongue, closed her eyes tight and shook her head. She'd always had a smart mouth on her, had always been the kid in class who'd blurt out wise-ass remarks that made the teachers look like fools. It would get laughs from her classmates, but that sort of stuff didn't go over well with the people whose authority she challenged.

One of Sun Tzu's Laws of Power echoed in her head:

Never try to prove that you are smarter than your adversary. Nobody in a position of authority likes to be embarrassed. Sometimes the deadliest weapons in a game of power are a lowered gaze and a submissive smile.

Ice straightened his sunglasses, then sighed out a lazy breath. "I do believe you," he said coolly. "I believe you're scared. I believe you understand that you're safer with me than out there on your own. I believe you know that whoever you're working with or working for now wants you silenced for good." He shrugged. "Which means you'll do and say anything to convince me you're being set up so I protect you from what we both know is coming."

Indy shot an involuntary glance at his crotch, then swallowed and shook her head. "If you're trained to break people, then you also know how to read people. You would

have been studying me from the first moment you saw me, watching for the telltale signs that I'm a liar and a cheat, a trickster and a traitor. Which means you already know I'm clean, already know I'm telling the truth." She shrugged. "Or else you're just not very good at your damn job."

Once more Indy closed her eyes tight and cursed herself. She just couldn't turn it off. What the hell was wrong with her? She was usually able to control her sharp tongue, was self-aware enough to know when to zip it. She also understood games of dominance and power—at least in theory.

But damn, putting those theories into practice was harder than she'd imagined.

Because she sure as hell seemed to be losing this game.

She was tied up like a hog by a man who completely outmatched her physically. She had no idea who was out to kill her. No idea who had set her up. No idea if it was one person or a bunch of people. No idea if it was a mistake or malevolence, if someone had it out for her in the Agency or if she was just collateral damage in a bigger game, just a sideshow and not the main act.

"You really are a class act, O'Donnell." Ice chuckled, shook his head, adjusted his Wayfarers like he was maybe

thinking about swapping them out for Aviators. “I bet you were that smart-ass in school who got laughs from your friends at the expense of the teachers. How’d that work out for you?”

Indy reddened. “My parents got called into the Principal’s office once a month. Luckily I was getting straight A’s in everything. Probably helped that I was obviously adopted. Could always play the *kid-with-abandonment-issues* card.”

Ice grunted. “Well, don’t bother playing that card with me. I simply don’t give a shit about your personal tragedies.” He glanced at the bottle of water, then flicked his gaze back in her direction. “Now, give me a name, O’Donnell. We already know you aren’t working alone. Give me a name and we might be able to cut a deal.”

Indy stared into his dark shades, trying desperately to see his eyes, wondering if maybe she’d read him wrong and he in fact *didn’t* believe she was innocent. “What’s it going to take to convince you I’m being set up, Ice? You want to beat it out of me? Torture me to make sure I’m not hiding anything from you?” She chuckled darkly, feeling a strange defiance rise up in her, like she *wanted* to push this asshole into a corner, force his hand, see if he could walk the talk. “Well, go ahead, big

man. I'm a woman half your size and tied up. You want to establish dominance, set your frame, show me that you're in control? Well, do your worst, tough guy. I don't give a shit anymore. I've told you the truth, and I fucking *know* you believe me in your heart. That's all I have to say, Ice. Your move now."

Ice didn't move. But Indy sensed a subtle stiffening in his frame, an almost imperceptible wave of rigidity that went through the tall man, like her words were affecting him in a way he couldn't deny, couldn't deflect, couldn't defeat.

"I don't think you understand the vulnerability of your position, O'Donnell," came his voice now, low and deadly from his throat. He pushed himself away from the sideboard, took an ominous step in her direction, his fists clenching at his sides, big like cinderblocks, bigger than her damn head. "You have no friends. You have no allies. You have no options. That wise-crack about abandonment issues doesn't feel so cute now, does it?"

"Trying to intimidate me with your size isn't particularly cute either," Indy snapped, that perverse defiance raging through her now, the stillness of the air making it hard to even breathe, her vision narrowing as her heat rose. She was

operating on pure instinct now, pushing him in a way she knew was dangerous. This man had broken people before. She could see it, feel it, damn well *smell* it. But she kept pushing like she couldn't stop herself, like she was coming undone, the mix of fear and anger and arousal all churning together in a hot soup of emotion. "Yeah, that's it, keep stalking closer, clench those fists harder, crack your knuckles like a caveman, stomp your feet like a barbarian, snarl like a savage. Does that work with the other women?"

Ice's fists clenched harder, and Indy swore she heard his knuckles crack in a way that sent chills down to her toes. She stared as he took another step in her direction. His jaw was tight like a wire, his neck clenched and strained, a thick vein throbbing along the side of his temple like the so-called Ice-man was melting into a puddle of hot rage.

Indy's own temples throbbed now, the fear coursing through her body as she fought back the urge to egg him on further, to see if he would lose control and do something that would perhaps break him before it broke her. She knew this was dangerous, but she had to push him to the edge, had to know if *he* was for real, if he was bluffing or not, if he believed her or not.

Ice took another step, stopping close enough that Indy was overwhelmed by his warm scent in the hot room. He took a dangerously slow breath. “I know what you’re doing, but it won’t work. You know you’re beyond the protection of American law, so you’re trying to appeal to some outdated sense of chivalry, trying to shame me into feeling guilty for picking on a woman half my size.” He snorted, then flashed a wicked grin. “You don’t know shit about me, O’Donnell. And so you need to be very fucking careful. Trust me, you do *not* understand how much danger you’re in right now. Not from whoever’s trying to kill you but from *me*. You think this is my first rodeo? You think you’re the first traitor I’ve had to break and then dispose of without so much as a headstone on her lonely fucking grave?”

Indy gulped back the tightness in her throat. Ice’s shadow loomed over her like a mountain. She blinked back her fear, closed her eyes tight, thought back to the way he’d handled her at the safe-house.

Cruelly, but also with care.

Now Indy flicked her eyes open and stared up at him.

“I think I’m the first woman you’ve had to break,” she said with a confidence that surprised her. “I know you were holding



yourself back when you handled me in the safe-house. You threw me against the wall but not hard enough to break my cheekbone. If I were a man my face would have been broken in the first three minutes with you. I *know* you're a hard man, Ice. I feel the violence simmering in your blood. But I also felt the self-control in you, the discipline in you, the goodness in you, the *man* in you." She swallowed hard, blinked twice as a trembling chill brought forth her next words. "I know I felt the man in you, Ice. The man who won't let himself hurt a woman. Especially a woman that he knows is innocent, knows is a victim, knows is ... is *his*."

Indy stopped abruptly, not sure what she'd just said, not sure what she'd meant to say, not sure where those words had come from. Her mouth hung open like she was grasping for the end of that sentence, for something that followed the word *his*.

But nothing came forth.

That *was* the end of the sentence.

*His*. Period.

Ice stared down at her like he'd been frozen. The color drained from his face as he took a staggering step back like her words had slammed into his chest. His big Adam's apple

moved as he swallowed. His fists unclenched as he took another unsteady step backwards.

Then he doubled over like he'd been gut-shot, and before Indy understood what was happening Ice thundered through the open bedroom door to the bathroom, retching like he was throwing up a lung, hacking like he was emptying himself of something wretched and poisonous.

Indy listened in stunned silence as Ice retched and roared in the bathroom. Then she blinked twice and cocked her head when everything went quiet.

Deathly quiet.

Indy closed one eye and stared suspiciously at the two empty water-bottles in the waste-basket. Then she glanced down at her bound wrists and shook her head before looking up and sighing out a breath.

“Didn’t they warn you not to drink the water?” she muttered in semi-disbelief, pushing herself off the couch and bunny-hopping towards the bedroom and across the carpet, stopping when she saw Ice’s large body curled up like a groaning fetus on the bathroom floor.

He was just barely conscious. It was either a stomach-virus or food-poisoning. Amazing how a tiny bug could bring down a giant.

And nice timing, too.

Maybe it was something she said?

Indy stared for a long moment, let the half-amused disbelief run its course. She considered her options, then remembered the plastic ties around her wrists and ankles and hurriedly glanced around the room.

Her gaze fell on Ice's duffel lying unzipped on the bed. She hopped over to it and exhaled when she saw a six-inch military knife in a synthetic black-resin scabbard.

Indy grabbed the knife with her tied-up hands, jimmied it out of its sheath, then sat down on the bed and positioned the knife blade-up with the handle held tight between her thighs.

Carefully she sliced through the plastic handcuffs, then quickly freed her ankles. She stood and rubbed her wrists, blinking at the still groaning Ice who was dry-heaving on the bathroom floor, his sunglasses shattered and spattered, the whites of his eyes showing as he gaped like a goldfish.

He looked completely helpless. Indy stood there and stared, a chill rising up her back when she realized she was free to go now.

She could take her gun back from his cargo flap. She'd leave her phone in case it could be used to track her, but she could get a burner phone easily enough. Mumbai was a cash-first city and her wallet was stuffed with American dollars and Indian rupees. She could disappear into the bustling city and figure out her next move. Maybe call someone she trusted in the CIA—her boss back at Langley, maybe even John Benson.

But now she remembered that Ice knew Benson's name, had made some remark about Benson paying for this damn hotel room.

Which meant Benson had sent Ice after Indy to begin with.

And that meant Indy couldn't trust Benson.

As for her boss at Langley ... well, if the CIA believed Indy was dirty, then she couldn't call *anyone* in the CIA, couldn't trust *anyone* in the CIA, couldn't trust anyone at the Embassy, couldn't trust anyone at all.

Except *him*.

Shit.

Now Indy rubbed the back of her neck and glanced at the groaning monster who'd tossed her at a wall and dragged her by the hair and tied her up twice already today.

And saved her life once, Indy reminded herself.

She glanced at the front door out past the bedroom, then back at Ice curled on the floor like a dying man.

He turned onto his side, clearly trying to regain his senses, get to his feet, maybe get to her again.

Indy felt the walls of the room closing in on her. Her vision narrowed to the point where she was only aware of the front door gleaming to her left and the glow of the bathroom door to her right.

A choice was opening up for her. Indy felt it in her gut like a punch, in her heart like a pinch, in her soul like a poke.

It was poignant and real, two paths diverging in the woods of her destiny, fate offering the choice of whether to go it alone or trust whatever instinct whispered that she was safe with this dangerous man.

She could go or stay. Trust logic and reason or follow whatever force had engineered this choice like it was a test, a fork in the road that commanded Indy to choose, to make a

conscious decision about which way to go, forward or backward, left or right, within or without.

With him or alone.

Indy took a long breath, let it out slowly.

Then she walked over to where Ice was on his hands and knees, retching out the last of whatever cosmic poison was racking his insides.

She stood above him and rubbed her chin. Then she chuckled once, blinked twice, hurried over to his duffel, reached inside and grabbed the set of heavy-duty plastic ties she'd seen tucked in the side flap.

Ice turned on his side and dry-heaved. It had been years since he'd thrown up, and now he remembered why he didn't drink more than three beers anymore, no matter how much Jack egged him on.

He spat onto the bathroom floor, feeling the burning taste of bile. His stomach was empty—which made sense, since he hadn't eaten a damn thing on the plane. You don't go into battle on a full stomach. Digestion uses energy, diverts blood-flow to the gut instead of the brain and muscles.

One more painful retch that made his ab-muscles burn and Ice knew his body had pushed out whatever the hell had done this to him. He knew he'd thrown up mostly water, but the bottles were factory-sealed and this was an upscale hotel that cared about the sensitive guts of coddled foreigners.

It wasn't the water.

Maybe it was something she'd said, came the hazy thought which thankfully didn't linger long enough for Ice to remember Indy's words clearly.

Now Ice blinked himself back into focus and saw Benson in his fever-dream. The man was wolfing down those sun-yellow egg-yolks and blood-red bacon. The diner, Ice thought with sick amusement. That bacon was undercooked, the eggs a little too runny. Probably a bout of salmonella that took some time to kick in. The bacteria needed twenty-four hours to multiply to critical mass. Then his immune system sensed the threat from the microscopic critters and purged his body.

“It wasn’t the water, by the way,” came her voice through Ice’s blurry head. He groaned once more, tried to wipe his mouth, realized he couldn’t because his hands were tied behind his back.

No fucking way.

Ice tried to kick himself upright, but his ankles were tied together with a double-long plastic tie that he knew couldn’t be broken with brute force. He cursed and spat, then rolled onto his side so he could look at her.

Indy O’Donnell was perched on the king-sized bed, a ravaged room-service tray beside her, two empty water bottles on the carpeted floor. She tracked his gaze to the water-bottles, nodded earnestly at him and flashed a sweet smile that even a semi-conscious Ice could tell was oozing with triumph.



“Yup,” she said, winking at him before turning back to the phone on which her thumb was scrolling. “Drank two bottles myself. The water’s fine. Must be something you ate.” She glanced at him again, raised an eyebrow, shrugged exaggeratedly. “Or maybe something I said hit home for you.”

Ice spat onto the bathroom floor, tried to remember what she’d said. His head pounded with the memory of her words. Something about chivalry and sensing the “good” man in him—whatever the hell that meant.

“I’m going to give you exactly ten seconds to get these ties off me,” he growled, his voice hoarse from the stomach-acid coating his throat. “Don’t be an idiot, O’Donnell. You’re only making things worse for yourself.”

Indy kept scrolling through the phone. It took a few seconds for Ice to realize that it was *his* damn phone!

“Fingerprint unlocked it,” she informed him matter-of-factly. “You really should add a passcode along with the biometrics. Don’t they teach you Delta guys that?” She scrolled some more, furrowing in concentration like she was reading something very interesting. “Oh, by the way, Jack called for you. Twice. I didn’t answer. Just texted him something about being all tied up. Sent an eggplant emoji and

a smiley with sunglasses. That's your callsign, isn't it?" She turned her head and smiled that annoyingly sweet smile.

"Jack's your brother, isn't he? I see the resemblance. He's got a great smile, by the way."

Ice groaned, but not from the indigestion. "He's a grinning fool. And what you're doing is equally foolish."

Indy ignored him. Kept reading on his phone. Ice glared at her, testing the ties around his wrist. He tightened his muscles and tried to pull his wrists apart, but he knew the ties couldn't be snapped behind his back. Not enough leverage. These weren't your average kitchen-ties. They were heavy-duty military-grade plastic with bonds that could withstand eight-hundred pounds of pressure. You could literally suspend a Volkswagen Bug with just one of these ties.

Still, even bound up tight Ice had some options. If he could get to his feet fast enough, he could bull-rush her with his head, launch himself at her like a damn torpedo, get her on the chin with the crown of his skull and knock that smug smile off her irritatingly pretty face.

And then the gloves would *really* come off.

So Ice lay still, waited for her to get back to reading whatever the hell she'd found on his phone.

Couldn't be that much. Benson had only given him the phone a day ago at the diner along with the undercooked bacon and infected eggs. There were no messages, no files, nobody but Jack in the contact list.

So what the hell was she reading with such furrowed interest?

"I'm sorry about your parents," Indy said suddenly, glancing over at him with a flash of sincerity that hit Ice in a way he didn't expect. She scrolled down on his phone, then looked at him again, a softness in those dark eyes. "It was sweet of you and Jack to sacrifice your careers to look after them."

"Go to hell." Ice closed his eyes tight and cursed inwardly. The Darkwater phone had access to military databases. She figured out his last name from Jack's contact information, ran a search on Ice Wagner, was now reading his damn personnel file. His discharge documents. His commendations and medals. Details of every mission that wasn't classified.

"That's not very nice," Indy said. She scrolled deeper through his file. "There's a bunch of classified files in your record. Looks like you've done some dirty work for the CIA

before.” She glanced at him over the phone. “So we’re almost colleagues.”

Ice ignored her. He closed his eyes and took several long breaths, prepping himself to leap to his feet and hurl himself head-first at her.

Slowly he coiled his legs to give himself leverage for the explosive burst.

Then Ice cursed inwardly when he realized she’d anticipated him and accounted for it.

The woman had daisy-chained three plastic ties together and tethered his ankles to an exposed pipe beneath the bathroom sink.

Ice felt the blood rush to his face. He imagined Jack’s grinning mug laughing at his dumb ass for being hog-tied and shackled. His vision was almost red with humiliation that was rapidly transforming to rage.

“Are you angry because I used up so many of your fancy plastic ties?” came her taunting, teasing voice from the bed. “I noticed that they can’t be unlocked. You have to cut them off. Seems like such a waste of plastic. Now I know why the military budget is so out of control.”

Ice rolled onto his side again, exhaled hard to cool himself down. “All right, so you got me. But you’re still here, which means you know that you’re dead without me. We both know you need my help. So you’re going to have to untie me sooner or later. There’s no other end-game for you. Unless you’re suicidal.” He took a breath, his eyes going cold when he remembered what Benson had told him about Indy O’Donnell. “Which you might be, considering your father killed himself.”

Something flashed across Indy’s face, and Ice knew he wasn’t defeated yet. He’d broken men with his fists and his feet, but he understood that words were weapons too.

Especially when those words carried secrets.

“You didn’t know, did you?” Ice whispered across the suddenly tense space between them. “You knew he was dead but not that he killed himself. Benson didn’t tell you everything.”

Indy blinked rapidly, forced that sweet smile onto her face.

But Ice could see she was shaken.

“You see now?” Ice hissed, keeping the pressure on, tightening the noose around her paranoia, stoking her fear and anxiety, reminding her that he was her only way out, the only

one she could trust. That's how you *really* got someone to open up to you. "You can't trust Benson. You can't trust the CIA. You can't even trust the blood that runs in your own fucking veins, O'Donnell. All you've got is me. I can help you, but remember what I said earlier: I have to *want* to help you." He glanced at the daisy-chain of plastic ties connecting him to the bathroom fixtures. "And we are *not* heading in the right direction."

Indy blinked her gaze away from him. She stared blankly at his phone, then tossed it onto the bedspread and swung her legs off the side of the bed.

"Sorry to ruin your psychological ambush, but Benson did tell me everything. I was only surprised that he told you." She sat barefoot on the edge of the bed, looking down at him, those intelligent dark eyes focused and alert. "I know about my father," she said softly, blinking twice quickly, her jaw tightening. "Benson told me while he was recruiting me. He told me their names. Told me how they died." She swallowed hard. "Told me *why* they died." She shrugged, forced a cold smile. "They died because of me. My mother wanted to give birth to me naturally, without medical intervention. I killed her while coming out of her." She shrugged again, her dark eyes

flashing with a wildness that was gone almost as fast as it had arrived, like there was something lurking within this woman, something stirring inside her, something that sent a chill of excitement snaking through Ice's body. "And then my father took his own life because he couldn't live without my mother. So I killed them both." She snorted, her soft features hardening for one deadly moment. "You think you can rattle me with that shit? Well, let me turn that psychological ambush back at you, Michael Wagner. How do *you* feel about your parents' deaths?"

Ice blinked rapidly, stared through the turgid air between them. "None of your damn business," he snarled, unable to stop the emotion from bursting out.

Now that triumphant smile burst back on Indy's face, but this time with a sharpness that Ice could feel cut into him like a blade.

"Be that as it may," she said wickedly, wiggling her brown toes in his direction, her eyes dancing with devilish delight. "But I looked them up in the databases on your phone. Seems your parents didn't make a single Medicare claim after the initial diagnoses for their cancers. And although you and Jack could have put them on your military insurance, they seemed

to have refused that too. The only prescriptions they ever got filled were for medical marijuana.” She cocked her head, narrowed her eyes. “I’m no doctor, but from what I can tell, both their cancers were caught pretty early. They had a lot of promising options, all of which would have been covered by Medicare or your insurance. They might still be alive right now if you’d been able to convince them to trust the doctors, trust the science, trust in *you*.” She shrugged pointedly. “But even with all your experience at getting people to do what you want, you failed to get your own parents to do what you wanted.”

Ice grinned in disbelief, not sure how the hell this woman had put all of that together just from simple medical records—or rather, the *lack* of medical records. In any other situation Ice might have been impressed by the way Indy’s sharp mind connected the dots to form a pattern, to make spot-on inferences based on sparse data.

Yeah, any other situation and Ice might have openly acknowledged that she was one hell of an analyst, that Benson was right to recruit her, that the CIA and the country was better off for having someone like Indy O’Donnell on their side.



But not in this situation.

Not when Ice was seriously compromised.

Compromised not because his hands and feet were bound and he was shackled to the damn plumbing.

Compromised because she had gotten under his skin, was making him feel things he did *not* fucking want to feel.

Mentally.

Emotionally.

And yeah, physically.

“My parents made their own choices,” he said with a feigned coolness that took some effort. He looked firmly into her eyes, hoping to hell he was hiding the heat simmering behind his gaze. “Just like you’re making choices right now, O’Donnell. What’s your end game here? You’ve already showed your hand by still being in this damn room.”

Indy nodded. “Exactly. Which should tell you that I’m innocent. Or else I’d have slit your throat instead of wasting all this military-grade plastic tying you to the plumbing.”

Ice shook his head. “It just tells me you’re smart. The CIA is onto you, and you know damn well you don’t have a chance

without me. The guy who wants you dead isn't going to give up because his first attempt went wrong."

"It's not as simple as that and you damn well know it." Indy stood now, her bare toes digging into the carpet as she stomped over to him, stopping far enough away that Ice wouldn't be able to lunge at her feet with his upper body. "I heard those men ask if you were Moses. They didn't know about you. But whoever set me up would have known Kaiser already sent someone to get to me. So why wouldn't he warn his own wet team instead of sending them in blind?" She shook her head again. "Whoever set me up *wanted* it to get messy. He *wanted* a firefight. So now we have to ask ourselves *why*." She shrugged. "Well, you need to ask yourself why. I already know why."

Ice reddened at the challenge in her tone. He gazed into Indy's sharp dark eyes, tightening his jaw as he ran through the possibilities.

Then he blinked twice and took a quick breath. "If it really is a set up, then you're probably not the real target. And if this guy wants it to get messy, it's because he wants the CIA to look bad." He blinked again, nodded sharply as the realization hit him. "Maybe Director Kaiser is the target. He's the one

who takes the fall if it gets out that the CIA has a traitor on his watch.”

Indy nodded, folded her arms beneath her tight little breasts, the outline of her nipples making Ice swallow hard. “*Two* traitors on his watch. I think this guy is daring and cocky enough that he wants the trail to also lead to someone high up in the Agency. That makes it look doubly bad for Kaiser. It’s one thing to have a low-level analyst like me go bad. Different ballgame if it’s a conspiracy involving someone high up in Langley, maybe with an office down the hall from Kaiser himself.”

Ice stretched his neck. His temples throbbed from dehydration, but the adrenaline was surging now, his mind sharp and alert. Indy was pulling him in with her story, and it was damn convincing.

He huffed out a breath, nodded up at her, trying his best to not let his gaze wander down to where her tight black pants were stretched tantalizingly over the V of her crotch. “Which means whoever’s pulling the strings is damn confident the trail won’t lead all the way back to him. He must have a top-notch hacker covering his tracks—probably a CIA tech insider.”

Indy nodded, began to pace the carpet in her bare feet. Ice watched her go past him, then gulped at the sight of her nice round ass move in those black stretch pants.

He was hard in his own pants, Ice realized as he stared shamelessly at her rear globes before averting his gaze just in time to not get caught when she turned. He took a sharp breath, forced his body into a sitting position, moved himself back until he was leaning against the bathroom threshold.

His bound wrists were behind him, and Ice slowly moved his fingers along the door frame until he found the bottom hinge. The steel hinge-panel wasn't quite flush against the wood, and a trickle of excitement went through him as Indy turned away again to continue her pacing.

Keep her talking, Ice told himself as he lined up his plastic handcuffs with the sharp edge of the steel hinge-panel. Slowly he began to saw his way through the plastic tie, stopping when Indy turned, just in case she was sharp enough to detect the subtle movement.

“If you're right, then you realize you're in even more danger.” Ice watched her eyes as she paced back towards him. “And not just from the guy who's setting you up. Maybe from Kaiser too.”

Indy stopped her pacing and blinked twice. Then her eyes went wide. “Shit,” she cursed, biting her lower lip and mouthing the f-word silently. “Because now maybe Kaiser himself has more of an incentive to get rid of me fast and quiet. If whoever’s setting me up can’t be connected to me, then I’m not an asset but a liability. I can’t give up a name I don’t know. All I can do is make Kaiser and the CIA look bad. I’ve already outlived my usefulness. Which means *everyone* might want me dead.”

Ice shrugged pointedly, using the motion of his shoulders to cut all the way through the plastic tie. His wrists were free now, but he stayed in his position.

Not that he had much of a choice. His feet were still bound at the ankles and tied to the sink-pipe. He might be able to wrench himself free from the pipe, but Indy had bound his ankles together tight with two sets of the plastic cuffs, and there was barely space to get his fingers beneath the plastic. No way he could get enough leverage to break the bonds fast enough to get the jump on her.

Which meant Ice had to draw Indy closer to him.

He shrugged again, then relaxed his shoulders and gazed lazily up at her. “Not everyone. Benson doesn’t want you dead

or else you already would be. And since he's my boss, it means I don't want you dead either. So how about untying me before the next wet team comes storming through that door.”

Indy smiled tightly, shook her head with that same tightness. Ice could see the wheels turning in her mind. He could sense the paranoia rising behind those dark eyes.

Intelligence and paranoia often went together, Ice knew as he watched her swallow hard and continue her pacing. She was a CIA analyst, trained to think in terms of double-crosses and conspiracies. Ice could see that her intelligence and imagination was fueling the fear, making her see possibilities that would be invisible to most people.

Ice almost felt sorry for her. But he stayed silent and let Indy think herself deeper into the abyss of anxiety, the pit of paranoia. Yeah, he was starting to believe that his first instincts had been right, that she was indeed being set up. But it didn't change the fact that he was tied up and compromised. His only priority was to get back in control.

Get back on top.

Now Ice coughed once, cleared his dry throat, gestured with his head towards the room-service tray on the bed. “Well, how about a drink, at least.”

Indy stopped at the far end of her pacing path. She was too far away for Ice to lunge at her. He needed to draw her closer.

She narrowed her eyes at him, flicked her gaze to the half-empty water-glass on her room-service tray, then looked back at him.

“Negotiation 101,” she said with the glimmer of a smile. “Never give away something for nothing. Quid pro quo.” She strolled closer to him, her hips moving in a way that made Ice’s throat seize up for real. “Sure, I can give you a drink. But what do I get in return?”

Ice shifted on his ass, wondering if she could tell how hard he was, how his body was taut like a wire as she got closer, how Ice was by no means sure what he would do when she got close enough for him to make his move, close enough for his hands to get on those curves.

“Consider it payback for saving your damn life,” he growled, his eyes narrowing as the animal in him began to awaken with every sultry step Indy took in his dark direction. He was rapidly moving past the point of reasoned negotiation, of thoughtful tactics. He just needed to hold steady until she was close enough.

And then he’d be on her.

Back in control.

Back on top.

Back where he belonged.

Indy stopped just out of his range. She tapped her big toe on the carpet. Her toenails were painted black, Ice noticed. Well-trimmed and perfectly even, toes naturally splayed in a way that told Ice she wore sensible shoes and also spent a lot of time barefoot.

Means she has good balance, Ice warned himself as she took another step towards him before stopping again. It won't be easy bringing her down. She could sidestep you, kick you in the face, break your damn nose if she gets you with her heel or the ball of her foot.

Silence fell over them like a shroud. Then a sigh emerged from Indy. She padded over to the bed, giving Ice one more glimpse of her butt as she bent over and picked up the half-empty water-glass.

She turned and took a sip, leaving a smudge of saliva on the glass, a shine of wetness on her lips. She began to walk towards him, cautious like a cat, careful like a kitten.



Did she suspect something, Ice wondered. Was it written all over his face? Ice prided himself on being unreadable, but this woman had exposed a part of him with that comment about his parents, with that probe into his past, with those spot-on guesses that hit him where it hurt, opened up vulnerabilities he didn't know existed.

His head buzzed as Indy moved closer with those glistening lips and those black-painted toes and that dark bruise on her cheekbone where he'd shoved her against the wall, pressed his hip into her ass before searching her for weapons as professionally as he could, using all his willpower to not squeeze that ass, to not pinch those nipples, to not part her legs and stick his damn face in there like the dog he was, to not rip off those stretch pants and tear off those panties to reveal her treasure, to sniff her secret, to take what he wanted, what he needed, what he knew was his.

Fucking *his*.

The last thought came not in words but in images, vivid and vicious, clear as daylight, darker than midnight, raw like a fresh wound, raging like a flooded river.

Suddenly she was close enough, and before he understood what was happening Ice went for her, lunging up with arms

outstretched, leaping at her and almost pulling the whole damn sink out of the fucking wall as he pounced.

Indy screamed as Ice's arms went around her knees. She kicked out but he locked her legs and dragged her down to the carpet.

Then he was on her like a beast on its prey, dragging her closer as she kicked and screamed, slamming his heavy body over hers and ramming his pelvis down hard against her hips to pin down her legs.

“You *fucker!*” she gasped as Ice caught her right wrist just in time to save his damn eyeballs from her claws. “You *asshole!*”

Ice cursed as her left hand got him on the nose with a side-swipe. She got him again, but finally he managed to grab the free wrist before she got a third shot in.

“Fuck, you made me bleed, you ... you *bitch,*” he growled as he felt the hot blood pour from his right nostril down over his lips. His nose throbbed. It wasn't broken, but she'd gotten a couple of solid blows in, enough to make his head ring like a dinner bell.

Ice shook his head to get it clear, blinked away the rage that was mixing with everything else this woman had made him feel, was still making him feel, feel in a way that was dangerous and deadly, like he was *this* fucking close to crossing the thin line that separated good from bad, man from beast, sex from violence.

He shook his head again to get the buzzing out of his brain. His hands were closed tight around Indy's wrists, pinning her arms down into the carpet above her head.

She writhed and thrashed under him, but Ice was lying on top of her like a dead weight, his hard heavy body smothering hers, his crotch pressed into her hips, his bound legs between hers as she tried to break free.

"It's over," he hissed down at her, clenching his teeth as the blood from his nose dripped off his lips onto Indy's face. "Settle down before you *really* get hurt."

Indy's eyes were wild and big, her body still squirming beneath his even though she was no match for him physically. Her hands and legs were pinned to the carpet, but she still fought like a lioness beneath him, snarling and spitting instead of sighing and submitting.

Just the way Ice liked it.

Now Ice closed his eyes tight, forcing himself back from the edge of that dark place where he was hyper-aware of his bulge pressing against her mound, his hardness against her softness, his muscles against her curves, the man he thought he was fighting the beast he feared he might be.

Two deep breaths followed by two more as Ice struggled to drag his energy back from the edge of that dark abyss.

But then pain ripped through his skull.

He roared as Indy lurched her head up towards his again, her forehead slamming into the bridge of his nose, her teeth clamping down on his lower lip and biting down viciously.

“Fuck you!” he shouted, ramming his face back into hers to break away from her animalistic bite. He spat blood onto her eyes and cheeks, cursed out loud again, raised his lower body up and slammed himself down on her to knock the breath out of this damn banshee who would not give up the fight even though she had no hope of winning.

“Fuck *you!*” she spat back, gasping and gritting her bloody teeth, lunging up and trying to bite him again like a viper.

“You’re a piece of shit. I almost trusted you. I was *this* close to thinking you believed me, that you were on my side.”

Indy lurched upward again, her eyes wild with anger, dark with hurt, his blood smeared on her lips and cheeks like war-paint, her gaze sharp with something that stabbed Ice's heart, twisted Ice's soul, dug deep into some place in him that didn't have a name, didn't understand words, a place of yearning and hunger, eternity and destiny, always and forever.

Ice froze for a moment. Stared like he'd been struck. His hold on her wrists loosened for an instant, just enough for Indy to lurch her head towards his again.

Ice took the blow on his nose, but when she tried to do it again he was ready. He pressed his face into hers to stop her from using her forehead as a battering ram. His bloody lips were against her bruised cheek now, her gasping breath hot in his pounding ears, her writhing body rubbing against his throbbing bulge, her scent rising from everywhere, from her bosom and her breath, her pits and her pussy.

Now Ice's vision was blood-red as the pain pounded his head and her musk invaded his mind. He realized with manic fever that he was grinding his cock into her crotch, holding her wrists down with his hands, flexing his neck muscles to hold her head down so she couldn't bite his damn face off.

She tried to bite him anyway, managing to clamp her sharp teeth down on his earlobe. She held on with those teeth, but without biting down hard enough to rip his ear off.

It was only when Ice felt her hot breath against his ear that he realized her mouth was open and she was gasping, panting, breathing hard and heavy, her body still moving beneath his but with a different sort of urgency, a different sort of rhythm, a different sort of need.

Ice was lost now, growling and snarling as he ground his rock-hard bulge against her mound. Her thighs were now parted wide, pressed flat into the carpet. Her fingers clawed at the air as Ice held her wrists down.

And then Ice was staring right into her eyes. She'd turned her face towards his and was looking at him with the hunger of a starving animal.

Immediately Ice was overcome with a yearning to just fucking *devour* her, consume her, own her, make her his. But he managed to hold still, locked in on her eyes, lost in that gaze, in that moment, that woman.

They stayed still in that long, lingering moment.

And then they both began to move against each other.

Not just him but her too.

He could hear the bathroom pipes creak and groan behind them as he moved up and down over Indy's body and she matched his motion beneath him.

Then Ice realized that the pipes weren't the only things groaning, weren't the only things straining, weren't the only things close to breaking point.

They were too.

That breaking point came and went and Ice knew they were beyond it now. He rammed his hips down against her crotch, grinding and groaning until they were writhing and thrashing together like a single merged organism consuming itself with the urgency of its need.

And as the fever dragged them both into its depths, Ice took her trembling lips fully into his gaping mouth and kissed her.

He kissed her.

By God, he kissed her.

He's kissing me, came the feverish thought along with the metallic taste of blood. Oh, God, he's kissing me.

And I'm kissing him back, came the next wild thought as the blood and saliva trickled out the sides of her gaping mouth, rolled down the back of her open throat.

Indy wasn't sure whose blood she was drinking, wasn't sure whose saliva she was swallowing, wasn't sure whose lips she was devouring, whose tongue she was taking down her throat like a snake. She wasn't sure of anything but the sensations ripping through her body.

Because there was no mistaking that.

No mistaking the way her body felt to be controlled like this, to be overwhelmed like this, to be held down by the impossibly heavy weight of this man.

Indy clawed at the air, pushing with all her strength against Ice's viselike grips on her wrists as he ground his rock-hard bulge into her pussy that she swore she could smell even through her clothes. She opened and closed her fists again as she thrashed beneath him, but Indy wasn't trying to break free.



In the privacy of her mind Indy admitted that being restrained was somehow shockingly liberating. A deep, dark part of her reveled in the strange safety of Ice's overwhelming strength, the perplexing warmth of his suffocating weight, the seductive security of being totally under his control, his ownership, his dominance.

Because in a way Ice was totally under her control too, came the feverish thought through the red-hot desire surging through Indy. He was holding her wrists and devouring her lips and grinding his heavy erection into her aching pussy, but Ice was a prisoner too, not just chained to the metal pipes but bound to her in a way Indy couldn't explain in words but could see in images, feel in emotion, understand in a way that was primal and primitive.

She cried out in her madness, her eyes shut so tight her head hurt. Behind her fluttering eyelids she could see patterns and colors. She was aware of her body and his with a vividness and intimacy that made it seem like they were a single organism right now, bound not to the physical world but to each other.

But at the same time the physical world was hyper-real to Indy. She could feel Ice's thick cock pressed lengthwise

against her slit. The layers of cloth between them only added to the friction, enhancing her arousal as they moved feverishly over each other like teenagers in the dark, using instinct as their only guide, desire giving them direction, passion their only purpose.

That purpose seemed to draw closer now, their movements frantic and erratic, grunts and groans filling the air around them, hot breaths coming in rapid succession, pants and gasps interspersed with the metallic creaks from the straining bathroom pipes being pulled into the fray.

Indy gasped out loud, then gulped to take a breath. She almost choked on Ice's tongue, biting down and making him growl into her mouth.

She heard herself cackle as Ice withdrew from her mouth, licked her face like a wolf, then pushed his throbbing erection down so hard against her crotch Indy felt her pussy lips spread from the pressure, sensed her wetness pour through two layers of cloth.

And suddenly Indy was coming.

She didn't know it until her eyelids flicked open while her eyes remained sightless, blind with raw ecstasy that shut down her brain and moved all her consciousness to her body, every

part of her body, from her black-painted toes to her blood-stained nose, from her throbbing clit to her soaking slit.

“Oh, *shit!*” Indy screamed, her hips bucking up to meet Ice’s desperate movements, her breath catching in her throat as she sputtered and spat and screamed again. “Oh, *fuck!*”

The climax ripped through her like a bullet, and Indy strained against Ice’s grip, pushed against his weight, then screamed again when his erection pressed down on her mound and stayed pressed against her throbbing slit.

She blinked her eyes into half-blurred semi-focus and gasped at the sight of Ice’s face contorted in a grimace of pure ecstasy. His neck strained thick like a tree-trunk, his jugular throbbing like he was about to explode and die, his eyes rolling up in his head like a man possessed, the blood from his nose and mouth mixing with their combined saliva to paint a picture of sheer madness, absolute insanity.

Indy stared in stunned wonder as Ice came like a train wreck, his thick shaft convulsing against her wet crotch. She could sense him exploding in his pants, could feel each shockwave of ecstasy go through his body and into hers like they truly were a single organism, a single orgasm.

Indy shuddered along with him, staring into his eyes as he found enough focus to look down at her. Indy herself was still humming from the bliss of her own climax, and the sensation of him coming in his pants against her crotch drew out a long trembling sigh that came from somewhere deep inside her chest.

Ice blinked twice more, grunting and grimacing through the death throes of his climax. His hips jerked one last time against her body, and then Ice let out a heavy groan and collapsed on top of her, his breath hot against her cheek, warm against her ears.

His grip on her wrists finally loosened, and Indy's breath caught as Ice's fingers traced their way across her palms before locking with her fingers tight, so tight it was like they were fused together, bonds that couldn't be broken, not now, not ever.

They lay in silence, their breathing falling into a comfortable rhythm, their hearts beating in lockstep, like everything about them had locked together like their intertwined fingers, their intertwined fates.

Then Ice raised his head, licked the crusty blood off his lips, frowned and blinked like he was surprised, had just

awoken from a dream, just returned from a trip out of his own mind.

“That was not supposed to happen,” he muttered, blinking again and shaking his head. His jaw tightened, but his eyes shone with a brightness that couldn’t be faked. A moment later he cracked a grin, shook his head, then leaned in and kissed her lips before smothering her with his weight again. “Fuck, that was *not* supposed to happen.”

Indy smiled up at the ceiling as Ice chuckled against her neck and then kissed her beneath her left ear, staying nuzzled against her like a big bad wolf taking care of its mate.

“Wait, are you saying this isn’t how Delta interrogators get suspects to talk?” Indy moved her hips playfully beneath him, giggling as he licked her neck and then followed it up with a noisy smacking kiss. “Dry-humping terrorists isn’t standard operating procedure?”

Ice pulled on her earlobe with his teeth, then raised his head and cocked his left eyebrow. His gaze moved down along their bodies to where they were still joined at the crotch.

“Not sure if *dry* is the right word,” he muttered, pulling his body back far enough that Indy could see the glistening wetness that had soaked through Ice’s combat pants.

“Oh, dear,” Indy whispered, a shudder going through her body and her voice at the same time. She blinked up at him, flashed a hesitant smile. The afterglow of their orgasms had blown away that earlier tension, but the space was rapidly filling with a new sort of tension.

A tension seething with one burning question.

“What now?” Indy blurted out, unable to stop herself when she saw a flash of something dark and unsettled on Ice’s face as he looked down at her. “Ice, what—”

Ice closed his eyes and shook his head. When his eyelids flicked open there was that coldness again, like he’d flipped that switch Indy had seen in him earlier, pulled that internal lever that turned his burning heat to cold stone.

Panic rose up Indy’s throat like a solid object threatening to throttle her from the inside.

Ice was suddenly unreadable.

Unreachable.

Unavailable.

“Now nothing,” he said gruffly, blinking and breaking eye contact long enough for Indy to see the wheels of doubt turning back there. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

“But it *did* happen,” Indy snapped, her cheeks burning with either humiliation or indignation, perhaps a bit of both. “And *you* made it happen.”

Ice snorted, twisting his bloodied nose, curling his bleeding lips. “You tied me up. You head-butted my nose. Cut my lip wide open with those fangs.”

“And then you kissed me,” she pointed out firmly, trying to wriggle herself out from under him. “Held me down and kissed me, rubbed yourself all over me like an animal. Called me a bitch too, if I recall correctly.”

“You sure as hell kissed me back. As for calling you a bitch for almost biting my face off ... yeah, you *do* recall correctly,” Ice said matter-of-factly, keeping his weight pressed down along the entire length of her body so she couldn’t get away. “Stop your squirming. You aren’t getting out from under me until I cut myself free of the damn bathroom fixtures. Where’s my knife?”

Indy shrugged beneath him, then *oof*ed out a breath as Ice dug his pelvis into her belly so he could arch his upper body up off her and look around the room.

“It’s on the far side of the bed,” Ice muttered. “Shit.”

“So let me up and I’ll go get it.”

Ice chuckled. “Yeah, right.” He raised an eyebrow, took a long look at the distance between them and the bed, then grunted. “I’ll hold on to your leg. You can stretch out and reach the knife. Toss it on the carpet where I can grab it.”

Indy stared exasperatedly up at him, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. “You seem to have forgotten that I had plenty of time to get away while you were retching up a tidal wave of sick all over the nice bathroom floor. I could have slit your throat with that knife. Or put two bullets in your thick skull. Gouged out your eyes with my damn thumbs.”

Ice stared back at her unfazed. “And you seem to have forgotten that although I’m not a smarty-pants analyst like you, I’m smart enough to see that you need me and will do whatever it takes to get me on your side.” He shrugged coolly. “*Whatever* it takes,” he whispered, his eyes flashing for one wicked moment.

Indy’s eyes and mouth widened in unison. “You did *not* just say that. You piece of shit. You held me down and came all over me like a damn hound dog.”

Ice didn’t flinch but his eyes flashed with more of that edgy wickedness—somewhere between playful and deadly.



“You came too. So if I’m a dog, what does that make you?”

Indy tried to slap him across the face, but Ice grabbed both her wrists, that look in his eyes finally breaking into a devilish grin, like the heat in his body was melting the ice in his eyes.

A flash of the same heat rushed through Indy as she felt Ice harden against her again. She blinked up at him, hating that he was totally messing with her mind, playing this game of dominance like a master. He really could turn it on and off.

And right now it felt like everything was getting turned on again.

Including her.

“Sorry to burst your macho bubble, asshole, but I didn’t come,” she said with as much cold dispassion as she could find in her rapidly warming body. “Don’t kid yourself. That wasn’t a turn-on for me. Not one bit. Keep dreaming.”

Ice’s grin tightened to a hard smile, his eyes narrowing with a sort of knowing that made Indy’s pussy clench.

“We both know you came as hard as I did,” Ice whispered, his erection clearly back, the hard length of his shaft pressing against Indy’s slit like it knew the truth hidden behind her

soaked panties. “The evidence is there, sticky and sweet, warm and wet.”

Indy reddened like a rose, a mortified gasp escaping her lips even as a fresh surge of wetness leaked from her pulsing vagina. “You’re sick,” she whispered thickly. “And all the stickiness in this situation has come from you. It’s just insulting to imply that I’d even be *remotely* turned on by a brute like you forcing himself on me.”

Ice grinned. “Ah, there it is. The guilt-trip. The appeal to chivalry.” He chuckled darkly. “This isn’t protest-night at the Yale Student Union, kid. You aren’t going to shame me into a damn thing. Yeah, I rubbed myself off all over you. And you came like a fucking waterfall in your filthy little panties.”

Indy swallowed hard, did her best to keep her frame, play the game—even though she wasn’t certain if she wanted to win or lose.

Wasn’t even sure what it *meant* to win or lose.

“If I’m wet it’s because I was so scared that I peed myself,” she informed him, that rose-red blush still burning her cheeks. “Does that make you feel like a real man, Ice? To hold down a woman half your size and use her like a rubbing post?”

Ice cocked a brow. “What’s a rubbing post? Is that a real thing?”

Indy couldn’t stop a giggle. “I don’t know. It sounds like a thing. It might be a thing for macho dogs like you when you don’t have a female handy.”

Ice rumbled out a laugh. “Why would a dude rub himself on a rubbing-post when he has two perfectly good hands to deal with the situation?”

Indy shrugged. “Well, what if he’s tied up. Like you were not so long ago.”

Ice frowned. “You have a pretty narrow opinion of men if you assume that a dude’s top priority would be to get himself off on a damn rubbing-post while he was tied up.”

Indy giggled again. “Based on the evidence presented, it appears that you were certainly in dire need of a rubbing-post while tied up.”

“Why would I need a rubbing-post when I have you?” Ice whispered, the grin breaking wide on his blood-crusting face, his frame breaking down along with it, his eyes now communicating what Indy could hear loud in her heart, sense deep in her soul, see clear in her mind. He leaned in and kissed

her once, a quick smack on the lips. “Dammit, Indy. I can’t hold my frame around you. Just can’t stop the grin from breaking through. Fuck. This shit just got real complicated. There’s obviously a big part of me that believes you.”

Indy closed one eye and scrunched up her face. “Wait, so there’s still a part of you that *doesn’t* believe me?”

Ice took a breath, sighed it out, shook his head. “There’s a part of me that knows I’m compromised, Indy. A cold, logical, dispassionate part of me that says I’ve crossed a line, brought feelings and emotions into the mix, muddied the waters, that I can’t trust myself to be objective anymore, that I should pull myself off the mission.” He swallowed hard, his grip on her wrists tightening for a flash. “Except I can’t do that either. Can’t just walk away from you now. I’m fucked, Indy. For the first time in my life I feel like I’ve lost my frame of reference, am in over my damn head on a mission.”

Indy blinked, swallowed, blinked again. She didn’t know how to respond. She felt something too, something warm and wonderful. But at the same time there was a cold, logical voice in her own head too, just like the one speaking to Ice.

Except Indy’s voice of reason whispered that she’d found a vulnerability in him and she needed to exploit it.

Her common sense told her she could take control of this game, manipulate this man to her advantage.

Except she didn't want to do any of that.

And she desperately hoped she didn't *need* to do any of that.

Because she was vulnerable too.

Because she'd crossed a line too.

Because she'd made a choice too.

Made it when she stayed in this room.

Made it when she kissed him back.

Made it when she came like that waterfall.

That waterfall down which she was still tumbling.

With nothing to grab onto but him.

“Listen, Indy,” he said now, his gaze sharpening again, the mood darkening again. “This is bigger than just the two of us. If Benson finds out I'm compromised he'll pull me out and send someone else in. Hell, for all I know, Kaiser's already taken this mission back from Benson. And that's if Kaiser even knew Benson sent me in to begin with. Shit, there are still so many unknowns. Where's my damn phone?”

Indy stared up at him, her mind spinning from the sudden change from levity and laughter to dread and trepidation. Now she remembered that Ice was still bound by his ankles, tied to the bathroom pipe. He couldn't reach his knife, couldn't reach his phone.

Sure, his hands were free so maybe he could wrench himself free or unscrew the pipe. Hop over to the bed and get his knife to free his ankle-cuffs.

But not easily.

Those military-grade plastic ties were designed to be unbreakable without a blade or serious leverage. It would take time for him to break free.

Which meant Indy could still run.

And maybe she *should* run.

After all, it was by no means clear what John Benson would order Ice to do. Benson was a huge unknown.

In fact, Benson had *always* been strangely unknown to her, perhaps something unknowable.

She'd been intrigued by Benson's presence back when he'd recruited her eight years ago. He exuded a curious mix of mystery and openness, somehow able to project an almost

paternal warmth alongside a dangerously dark coolness. He knew things about her past that she'd never been able to independently verify.

But yet Indy had immediately believed him, seen the truth in Benson's shining silver eyes that seemed to reveal as much as they hid.

In fact it was those dark revelations about how her parents died that drew Indy into the CIA, sealed the deal on her recruitment. In a way it felt like she'd always known of her tragic origins, like those memories were burned into her body, seared into her psyche, somehow recorded in her soul, hidden in her heart even though she'd been a newborn when her mother died, a week old when her father killed himself, her consciousness barely focused in the physical world, her mind just an amorphous mass of swirling connections and impressions that would form the deep-seated base of the woman she'd become.

The woman she was destined to become, fated to become, born to become.

And was that fate finally coming to fruition?

Was that destiny finally being delivered?

Was little Indy all grown up now?

“Grow up, you two,” came a crackling voice from somewhere above them, somewhere beyond them, somewhere in the amorphous ether, the spinning cosmos. “There’s no such thing as a rubbing-post. I checked with Jack, and he confirms that if there were such a thing, his big brother would have never left his room.”

Indy stared as Ice’s face reddened like he was about to erupt like a hot volcano. Crackling laughter came from above them, and it took Indy a moment to realize the man’s voice came from Ice’s phone on the bed.

“Benson, you piece of shit!” Ice sprung off Indy and lunged for the phone, seemingly forgetting that he was still lashed to the bathroom pipe. With a roar he fell back on top of Indy, squeezing the breath out of her. “Dammit.”

Indy gasped in a breath, then craned her neck towards the bed. “What’s going on? How is Benson talking to us through your phone?”

Of course, Indy was a spook herself and the answer came before anyone needed to say another word.



Which was just as well, because there were no real words being spoken. Just thundering guffaws from the phone and thunderous bellows from Ice as he wrenched and jerked against his restraints, his movements bringing forth more gasps from her as Ice's weight shifted erratically over Indy's body.

Ice had released her wrists in his embarrassed rage and desperate attempts to break free, and now Indy shimmied her body out from under him, scrambling out of range on her hands and knees as he tried to grab her bare ankles and drag her back.

She clambered to her feet, pushed her wild hair away from her eyes, took another gasping breath to refill her lungs after Ice had emptied them with his weight.

Then she stormed over to the bed and grabbed the phone. Sure enough, Benson's voice was coming through the speaker even though there was no active call. The sonofabitch had been listening. For how long was anyone's guess, and Indy was too mortified to make that guess.

Especially when she heard another man's wicked laugh and realized Ice's brother Jack was on the line as well.

“Toss me my damn knife, Indy,” Ice shouted from the carpet. “Or I swear to hell I will break this pipe and then your damn neck before hunting Benson and Jack down with extreme fucking prejudice.”

Indy frowned down at him, then held the phone up and sighed into it. “Hey, Jack, why is your big brother nicknamed Ice when he blows his top like a volcano at the slightest inconvenience?”

More roaring laughter from the phone. Indy saw the camera flash to life now, and she couldn’t resist pointing it at Ice hog-tied to the bathroom sink and throwing a temper tantrum on the carpet.

“No fucking *way!*” howled Jack through the phone. “Damn, brother. You got *smoked!* Please tell me you’re recording this, Benson. I need a copy of this video.”

Jack hooted some more, but then his laughter faded into the distance and Benson’s voice came on the line. “All right, that’s enough comic relief. O’Donnell, go ahead and cut Ice loose.”

Indy hesitated. Jack’s laughter had been infectious, and she couldn’t help but smile at the brotherly teasing. But at the

same time that voice in her head whispered that Benson was still an unknown.

She looked into the camera and shook her head firmly.  
“Not until I have your word that you believe I’m innocent, that you know this is a setup, that you aren’t going to order Ice to break my neck the moment he’s free.”

“He won’t need to order that last part if you don’t toss me that knife right now, Indy,” came Ice’s growl from the carpet.  
“As for you, Benson. You’re next in line. Then Jack gets his ass kicked.”

Indy glanced at Ice, saw that he was on his back and grinning up at the ceiling. He’d cooled down just as fast as he’d heated up. Clearly Benson was telling him to stand down, giving Ice the green light to do what Indy secretly hoped he was going to do anyway:

Trust her.

Help her.

Protect her.

Love her?

The thought came from nowhere and everywhere, and Indy’s head buzzed so hard that she barely heard Benson

confirming that he believed Indy was being set up and the mission had changed.

Or maybe this had always been the mission, came the thought from Indy's thumping heart as she unsheathed Ice's knife and sliced away the plastic cuffs from his ankles.

She glanced into Ice's smiling green eyes as he yanked away the broken plastic ties and flashed her a quick wink. The phone was flat on the bed, the camera covered by the bedspread, and Ice seemed to know it because he leaned in and followed that quick wink with a lingering kiss that confirmed something that couldn't be spoken out loud—and not just because Benson and Jack were listening.

“Listen up, kids,” came Benson's voice from the phone. “Kaiser's given me full authority to get to the bottom of this, but at the same time I'm on a short leash. Can't give you all the details right now because I'm still figuring things out. It's not going to be easy to flush this guy into the open.” He paused, took a noisy breath, exhaled hard into the phone. “Even though I already know who it is.”

Ice glanced at Indy, then sprung to his feet and snatched up the phone. “If you know who it is, then why do you need to flush him out? This kind of shit doesn't go to trial. You don't

need evidence that'll hold up in a court of law. Hell, I can get on a plane and be back in the States by tomorrow. I'll finish it quiet and clean, Benson. Plausible deniability, just the way you spooks like it. Mission accomplished. Threat eliminated. Isn't that what Kaiser wants anyway? Get rid of whoever's trying to bring him down?"

Benson sighed into the phone. "It's not that simple, kid. Just like Kaiser wouldn't green-light a hit on Indy without knowing for sure that she's dirty, he's not going to allow me to take out a top CIA guy without real proof. Yeah, we don't need proof that'll hold up in court. But the CIA has its own internal standards, its own watchdogs. Kaiser still answers to Congress through the Senate Intelligence Committee. You do recall that Senator Robinson heads that committee, right? This needs to be handled very carefully. If it blows up, we could all get burned. Kaiser and Robinson included. And that *cannot* fucking happen."

Ice rumbled out a breath, his eyes darkening. He glanced at Indy, then nodded towards the phone. "Roger that. I know how important Robinson is right now. I believe in the guy too, Benson. I want to see him in the White House too. But, damn, Benson, I want this guy dead for setting Indy up."

Indy blinked rapidly as her heart fluttered from Ice's fiercely protective words. But she focused on what she'd heard about Senator Robinson, her gaze darting from the phone to Ice and then off to the side.

She'd been following the political scene closely, of course. The current president was at the end of his second term. The presidential primaries were coming up in a few months. Senator Robinson was a frontrunner for his party's nomination, and Indy liked the man, thought he was remarkably forthright, believed that he was about as uncompromised as any major politician she'd seen in at least a decade.

Oh, and he was married to one impressive woman.

Yup, Robinson's wife pretty much sealed the deal as far as Indy's support went. She'd been a fan-girl of Princess Delilah for years, ever since the African princess had arrived in DC. The word on the Hill was that she was every bit an equal part of that Washington power couple. There were even opinions that Delilah might have been the one running for office if she'd been born in the United States.

Either way, the thought of Marcus Robinson and Princess Delilah in the White House sent a shiver of excitement down

Indy's spine.

And it sounded like Benson shared that excitement.

Indy burned to know more, but she held her tongue and listened. After all, the spy business was more about listening than talking, wasn't it?

"Maybe you'll get your chance, Ice. But not yet. That's it for now," came Benson's crisp voice. "I need to poke around here in Langley, follow up on a couple of hunches before I name names or point fingers."

Ice stroked his day-old stubble, shot a quick glance at Indy, then back towards the phone. "Are we safe at this hotel?" he asked softly. "Is my alias solid? Or do I need to be ready for another wet-team like at the safe-house? What about Moses? Is he compromised? Is he dirty?"

Benson was silent for a long moment. "Your alias isn't connected to the CIA, so the name won't trigger anything. Moses is clean and out of the picture. The only risk is that our guy probably has a hacker in CIA tech working for him, so there's a chance you get made from the Mumbai airport surveillance footage. Our guy knows Kaiser reached out to me, and unfortunately Darkwater isn't as dark as I'd like these days. There are people at West Point who've guessed that you

and Jack joined Darkwater. These days rumors get put into text messages, and both CIA and NSA have artificial intelligence programs scanning texts and emails and phone calls every second of every day. So if our guy's got someone good in CIA tech working for him, it means we have to assume nothing's a secret until this guy himself is no longer a secret." He took another breath, let it out slow. "Truth is, if it is who I think it is, the game just got very fucking dangerous. For all of us. Stay alert. Stay moving. I'll be in touch. Good luck and God bless."



**CIA HEADQUARTERS.**

**LANGLEY, VIRGINIA.**

“God bless you, Rhett. Coming down with something?”

Rhett Rodgers looked up in feigned surprise, dabbing his nose with a clean tissue from the silver metal box on his custom-built standing desk. He glanced at the tissue to make sure there was no blood on it, then tossed it at the silver metal wastebasket that matched the tissue box.

A quick splash of alcohol-free disinfectant later Rhett strode across the walnut floorboards of his private office and shook hands with the silver-haired, wolf-eyed man who’d just entered.

“John Benson. They still let you walk around unsupervised?” Rhett flashed his best rendition of a genuine grin, making sure to smile with his eyes, just like he’d been taught thirty years ago.

Taught by this very man standing before him, grinning back at Rhett like the coyote he was, had always been, would always fucking be.

“Rhett Rodgers.” Benson’s handshake was firm, his grip lingering long enough to reinforce the message that Rhett had already gotten loud and clear just from Benson’s presence. “Heard you were back in the States. Thought I’d stop by and say hello.”

“Well, hello then,” Rhett said, pulling his hand away from Benson’s death-grip and gesturing towards a lonesome straight-backed chair standing against the far wall. “Grab a seat.”

Benson shook his head, then strolled over to Rhett’s standing-desk and rapped his knuckles on the walnut table-top. “I’ll stand, thanks.” He gazed out the large window overlooking the shady tree-lined campus of CIA Headquarters, then turned back to Rhett. “Won’t be staying long.”

Rhett shrugged, shooting a quick glance at his open laptop on the standing desk. The screen had been blank but now the pop-up password prompt flashed. Rhett chuckled inwardly. Same old Benson. That seemingly nonchalant knuckle-rap on

the desk had jostled the laptop just enough to bring it back to life.

Had Benson been hoping the screen wasn't locked, that Rhett would be caught red-handed with his fingers in the pie, sticky sweetness all over his grubby fingernails?

Nah, Rhett thought as Benson's eyes flashed with that trademark mixture of mischief and manipulation. Benson was just sending another message.

In fact everything about this little visit to say "hello" was a message.

Benson knew.

Of course he fucking knew.

Rhett wouldn't expect any less from the crafty old bastard.

The crafty old bastard who was single-handedly responsible for the trajectory of Rhett Rodgers's life.

At least the past thirty years of it.

"What do you want, John?" Rhett let an edge creep into his tone. Benson might know, but he couldn't prove a damn thing. It was time for Rhett to send his own damn message.

That this was Rhett's CIA now.

Benson was old news, just like Kaiser would be old news soon enough.

Benson shrugged, kept his gaze fixed on Rhett's, strolled languidly across the room, stopping at the door and shrugging again. "Like I said, just stopped by to say hello to some old friends. Nostalgia, I guess."

Rhett chuckled darkly. "We were never friends, John. But nice to see you're enjoying your retirement." He took a breath, glanced pointedly up at the ceiling, tapped his lower lip and then cocked his head. "Darkwater, isn't it? That's what you're doing now?"

Benson didn't flinch, but Rhett sensed a flicker of something behind those wily silver eyes.

The flicker didn't last long, and suddenly Benson cracked a grin. "Why, you looking for a side-gig? Got something you need done off the books?"

Rhett blinked, momentarily taken aback. But he recovered in a flash, grinned back at Benson. "If I did, I sure as hell wouldn't call your guys. Not unless I wanted to spend the next six months engineering a massive cover-up for another Darkwater mess. Is that why you're here today? Getting Kaiser to clean up another mess like that shitshow in Somalia?"

Or Hong Kong? Iceland? Scotland? Or like that mother of all clusterfucks on the *Rivington* a few months ago? Nice job unleashing Diego Vargas on Senator Robinson and his family, by the way.”

Now Benson really did flinch. Rhett smiled as the energy surged through his still-hard body, his wire-tight frame that was always coiled and ready like a viper. He still loved the game, and clearly Benson loved it too.

Especially when the stakes were this high.

“Robinson doesn’t need to worry about Diego Vargas,” Benson said stiffly, his eyes sharpening. “And Kaiser doesn’t need to worry about cleaning up another Darkwater mess.” He took a breath, huffed it out, shrugged and ran his fingers through his hair. “That’s why I’m at Langley today. Kaiser called me in, told me it’s over, that he can’t cover for my ancient, out-of-control ass any longer.” Benson sighed, flashed a pointed look in Rhett’s direction. “Apparently I’m now a liability for Martin. A drag on his reputation. There are people gunning for him, it appears. Ambitious up-and-comers eyeing the corner office, the director’s chair.”

Rhett let out a laugh, open-mouthed and hearty. “This building is filled with professional back-stabbers and world-

champion double-crossers. There's always someone scheming for the next rung up in the ladder." He laughed again, shook his head in semi-disbelief at the barely veiled threat. "I'm not going to apologize for being ambitious, John. And if you came here to dangle my past in front of me like a threat, it's not going to work. I've paid my debts, devoted thirty years of my life to this country. There's no physical evidence that can hold up after all these years. And you sure as hell don't have any *moral* hold on me. My conscience is clear, John."

Benson snorted. "Your conscience was *always* clear, Rhett. There was never any *moral* hold on you. You took my deal based on ruthless self-interest and supreme self-awareness. You knew what you were inside, and I knew it too. I offered you the chance to channel that ruthlessness into service for your country. You took the offer, and you did your job. But let's not kid ourselves that you did it for patriotism or any higher moral calling. You did it to save your own ass."

Rhett snorted back, ran his hand through his still-thick salt-and-pepper hair. "Fuck you, John. I'm not the same man I was thirty years ago. Not after three decades of working in the shadows, doing things that *nobody* wants to admit the Agency does."

Benson's well-lined face settled into a tight smile. "Oh, please. Nobody survives in the shadows that long unless they're a cold-hearted snake. Don't pretend like you didn't love every minute of it, Rhett. The only thing that's changed about you is that you've had thirty years of practice being the same fucking guy you always were." He chuckled once, exhaled hard, shook his head and pulled open the door. "I didn't come to threaten you with the past. After all, it's *my* past too. I'm already on shaky ground with Kaiser and Robinson. It's not like I come out smelling like roses if I start telling tales about our shared history." He stepped out into the empty hallway, turned and narrowed those wolf-eyes for a parting shot. "Good luck, Rhett Rodgers." He grinned wide. "You know, I still love the name you picked. Rhett Rodgers. Just rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Smooth as butter. Slick as oil." He shrugged coolly, his grin settling into a knowing smile. "Names are meaningful, Rhett. Especially the ones we choose for ourselves."

And with that Benson turned on his heel and was gone, striding down the long dark hallway like a man on a mission, a man who'd done what he came to do, a man who'd never stopped playing the game.

“Fuck,” Rhett muttered as he watched Benson disappear around the corner. He sniffed hard through his stuffy left nostril, picking up the hint of dried blood in his raw nasal cavity. “Damn it.”

He closed the door and locked it, then strode over to his desk and snatched another tissue from the box. Blew his nose and cursed at the streak of blood. He tossed the tissue, then blasted his nostrils with saline nose-drops from a squeeze-bottle, blinking away tears and coughing twice.

It had been almost a decade since he’d kicked that nasty cocaine habit he’d picked up on that undercover assignment in Eastern Europe, when he’d infiltrated the inner circles of Belarusian High Society and had to play the part, play his role, play the game.

The snorting had only lasted a year, but the well-connected heiress he’d been “working” was one hell of a party-girl and keeping up with her had gotten him dangerously addicted. Of course, Rhett dug himself out of that hole with the same discipline and commitment he put into his work, but that year of rampant cocaine-use permanently damaged the mucous membranes in Rhett’s sinuses. He fucking hated it, hated her



for it, made sure she fucking felt it when it came time to end both the assignment and that bitch's useless life.

Now Rhett cursed again as he thought of the latest bitch who was rapidly outliving her usefulness.

India O'Donnell.

*Names are meaningful*, came Benson's reminder.

Rhett rubbed his eyes and exhaled out loud. The name *India* had indeed drawn his attention when it had popped up on Rhett's radar somewhat randomly. Rhett had been raised by a Southern grandmother for whom *Gone with the Wind* was a sacred text. His earliest memories were of her sipping strawberry wine and reading those holy words out loud. She'd called him Rhett to her *Scarlet*, then assigned the side-character names to the pets and neighbors.

India Wilkes, of course, was one of those side-characters, and so when Rhett was forwarded a CIA position-paper with the name *India O'Donnell* listed as the author, he couldn't resist scanning it even though he generally ignored those trite analyst reports.

The report was reasonably well-written, with some rather keen insights. There were even some edgy and borderline

provocative opinions about the love-hate triangle between India, China, and Pakistan. It was only when Rhett got to the end that he realized the paper was an answer to a question he'd been asking more and more over the past few years, ever since Benson had left the CIA and Rhett had decided to make his move to Langley, start playing a different sort of game, experience a different sort of power than what he exercised over the men and women he spent thirty years working from the shadows.

Mostly women, of course.

After all, he hadn't chosen the name *Rhett* for nothing.

Yes, he was Rhett through and through.

Dark-hearted pirate.

Plunderer of pussies.

Pillager of panties.

Rhett grinned and rubbed his jaw, almost shivering as excitement raced up his spine. This whole thing had come together in a dazzling flash of insight as he'd read that position-paper penned by some analyst at the Mumbai Embassy.

He'd already been searching for a way to pound the last nail into the coffin of Martin Kaiser's reputation. He'd spent months cozying up to Senator Robinson, making himself useful to the Senate Intelligence Committee, drawing the Senator into his corner with a masterful confidence game that Rhett had perfected over three decades of manipulating powerful men and women from the shadows.

And this simple paper with the name *India* on it had pulled together the final piece of the puzzle.

A way to hasten Martin Kaiser's downfall.

And perhaps pull John Benson down with him.

Now the thrill of the game made Rhett's jaw clench and almost seize up. He trembled with anticipation for the way this could play out.

Yes, having Benson in the game made things more complicated, sure as hell made it more dangerous.

But at the same time, Rhett understood that it *had* to play out this way.

Their fates were intertwined, Benson's and his.

Still, Rhett had been somewhat blindsided when he heard the name John Benson while listening in via Edwin Moses's

phone. It worried him that Kaiser had handed the O'Donnell thing to Benson and Darkwater. Rhett had expected that Kaiser would keep this away from Benson, especially with Senator Robinson breathing down his neck to put some distance between the CIA and Darkwater.

It was only when Rhett dug deeper into India O'Donnell's history that he saw the connection.

Benson had recruited O'Donnell himself.

That detail was buried in a footnote, and Rhett had missed it during his first review of O'Donnell's file. He wondered now if he'd have gone ahead with the set-up if he'd known Benson had recruited O'Donnell himself.

Either way, there was no turning back now.

Not now that the game was in play.

Sure, he could have pulled the plug the moment he heard Benson's name. Rhett had momentarily panicked that Kaiser wanted to keep this totally off the books, that he didn't give a rat's ass about O'Donnell's innocence, that he just wanted her gone before word ever got out that there might be a traitor in Kaiser's CIA.

Rhett could have backed off right then, just let the whole thing go, let O'Donnell get put down quietly if that was Kaiser and Benson's play.

But instead he'd chosen to lean in to the twist in the game, take Benson's involvement as a gift not a curse, an opportunity not a setback.

And so Rhett pivoted at the last minute, sent in that sloppy wet-team without warning them about Benson's Darkwater man. It would create a mess, add some doubt to the mix, which might play out exactly how Rhett wanted.

Because Rhett didn't give a shit about O'Donnell or the Darkwater guy. The real game was to make Kaiser look bad, but at the same time not so bad that it became obvious that someone was setting the whole thing up to bring Kaiser down.

It was a delicate dance to find that balance between just messy enough to be believable and *too* messy to be true. The immediate risk was that Benson's Darkwater man would put O'Donnell down *too* quietly, clean up things so efficiently that none of it would stick to Kaiser and the CIA.

Sending in that wet-team pretty much wiped away that risk.

But it introduced a new risk.

Because now Kaiser and Benson both knew that someone else was pulling the strings. Someone higher up in the Agency.

Of course, that was always going to come out, Rhett reminded himself as he strode to the window and pulled the drapes closed. After all, one low-level analyst sending classified files to the Chinese and Pakistanis and Indians might not be enough to bring Kaiser all the way down. The Director still had Robinson's ear, still had decades of solid results backing him up.

So eventually it would have to become known that someone high up in Langley had turned traitor on Kaiser's watch. Of course, with one of the CIA's top hackers in Rhett's pocket, the trail would never lead back to Rhett himself, and eventually Kaiser would have had to take the fall for what amounted to a double failure.

So yeah, that had always been Rhett's end game.

Benson's involvement just accelerated that part of the game.

But it had also changed the game.

Changed it in a way that was both thrilling and worrisome.

Thrilling because it gave Rhett a chance to bring down not just Martin Kaiser but John Benson as well.

Worrisome because it was John fucking Benson.

John fucking Benson.

Diego Vargas adjusted the scope, zooming in on the front lawn of Senator Marcus Robinson's townhouse. It was late morning in the upscale Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC, and Diego knew the Senator was on the campaign trail with his entire picture-perfect family, glowing pregnant wife front and center.

Diego had watched the Robinsons on TV last night from his hole-in-the-wall studio apartment in Southeast Baltimore. The Senator and his wife on stage somewhere in Ohio or Idaho or Iowa, holding hands and flashing beaming white smiles like headlamps. Delilah wore a white dress that showed off her swollen pregnant belly, and the sight had made Diego's gut churn with the bitter memory of another pregnant woman, her beautiful body carrying a part of him within her. The memory sickened him, and he gritted his teeth and forced that dark energy back into the psychic channels he'd created with blood and violence, the only way he could handle the rage of what had happened, the despair of what might have been, of what had almost been, of what had been right there before it was



taken from his arms, torn from his grasp, ripped from his very soul.

His soul which had turned dark all those years ago, when Diego had last held hands with his pregnant wife, last kissed his young daughter, last looked into their pretty brown eyes, last prayed to the God who had forsaken him that night in Mexico City when they took his family from him, turned the flame that burned in that proud young Mexican Marine from light to dark.

Diego swallowed the bitter lump in his throat, forcing away the memories that had been bubbling up more and more in the three months since he'd swum ashore from the *Rivington*, just barely escaping with his life.

He'd hidden beneath the dark waters and watched Kyle Northrup's broken body drift past him, stared as that tattooed beast Hogan had somehow survived the two-hundred-foot drop from the *Rivington*'s foredeck to the water, saved that damn nanny Hannah like a fucking hero.

Of course, with both the Northrup brothers dead it mattered little whether the nanny lived or died. Diego had other things to worry about back then.

One of which was this silver-haired, wolf-eyed man who was now standing outside the Senator's empty home and talking to a couple of hard-looking men who were almost certainly part of this off-the-books outfit that Diego had recently learned was called Darkwater.

"John fucking Benson," Diego muttered from his perch atop an apartment building around the block from the Senator's Georgetown townhome. He took another long look at the man, then pulled his scope down and shoved it into the battered metal toolbox that was part of his current disguise as a maintenance man.

He crept away from the roof edge, then stood and dusted off his generic gray uniform. He'd grown out his hair and beard over the past three months, lost maybe ten pounds of weight, replacing it with lean muscle. On the *Rivington* he'd been buzzed bald and shaved clean, and right now even his fellow Zetas wouldn't recognize him through the hair and beard. Add to it the uniform and the toolbox and Diego was almost invisible, both in the Hispanic neighborhoods of Baltimore and in the whitewashed streets of Georgetown, where he was just another Mexican maintenance man going about his minimum-wage business.

Diego glanced down into his open toolbox. The polished black metal of a silenced Glock 17 handgun gleamed back at him. It was merely a precaution, of course. He was too far away to take a shot.

Though he desperately wanted to take a shot at John Benson. How sweet would it be to get that meddling *cabrón*. Diego remembered enough about the man from those early days down in Guatemala, when the American CIA and the Mexican Special Forces started those training camps to build an anti-Cartel off-the-books team trained by U.S. Special Forces.

A team that eventually became the Zetas.

Strange how intentions and results could end up so far apart.

Stayed focused on your own intentions, Diego reminded himself now as he forced himself to turn away from Benson. He snapped the toolbox shut, walked silently to the metal roof-door in his rubber-soled canvas shoes, stepped into the cool stairwell, padding his way silently down six flights of stairs like a cat.

He tried again to put Benson out of his mind, but seeing the man had awakened some festering rage which would not

die easy. Diego had seen Benson clearly on that floodlit lifeboat after the *Rivington* mess, recognized him immediately even though it had been twenty years. At the time Diego had chalked it up to coincidence, but now he understood that there were no such things as coincidences when it came to John fucking Benson.

Diego's battered white van was still where he'd left it in the apartment building's small rear lot. It was late morning on a weekday, and the lot was mostly empty.

He opened the passenger-side door and placed his toolbox on the dusty floormat. Then he popped the glovebox and grabbed the pouch of American Spirit tobacco. He rolled a cigarette, lit it with a throwaway plastic lighter, then puffed out a cloud of smoke and relaxed against the side of his van.

He'd come here to scope out the Senator's townhouse while the family was out of town. Diego knew it would still be guarded, but certainly with less care than when Robinson and Delilah and the kids were at home. Seeing Benson hadn't really affected the day's plan. Diego wasn't dumb enough to go close to the house and risk get captured on camera.

Diego sighed out some smoke, took another deep drag, then tossed the half-smoked cigarette and stepped on the

burning cherry, grinding it into the asphalt as he mulled over what he'd seen on this little recon mission.

The townhome was built of stone, which immediately took away any chance of penetrating the walls with even a high-powered bullet. The windows were bulletproof too, and the front door had been replaced so it opened outward instead of inward. That was classic CIA and Secret Service protocol, which meant that the new front door was probably reinforced steel with just a thin wood veneer to make the place look less like the bunker it was.

Diego started the engine and put the van into gear, pulling slowly out of the parking lot and into traffic, making sure he stayed well below Georgetown's 30-mph speed limit. He might be invisible to the average man on the sidewalk, but he would be very visible to a cop cruising this posh neighborhood.

Especially if Benson had guessed it was Diego Vargas who'd been on the good ship *Rivington*.

But it would only be a guess, Diego thought as he drove out to Dupont Circle and took the ramp to the nearest highway. Benson hadn't seen Diego himself, and even Hannah the nanny and her boyfriend would have only gotten a short

glimpse. They'd have described Diego as a muscular Hispanic male of medium height with a buzzed head and no facial hair. Diego had plenty of scars, but nothing too identifiable on his face. Perhaps Hannah and her boyfriend had been shown some old photographs of Diego from the CIA archives, but he doubted they could make a confident positive identification.

Still, Benson's continued involvement made Diego uneasy. He'd had one of his men back in Zeta Nation do some digging on Benson. They'd turned up some rumors that Benson had left the CIA seven years ago and was now running an off-the-books team that appeared to have the blessing of CIA Director Martin Kaiser and even Senator Robinson himself—who was head of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The connections worried Diego, but today's development gave him some hope.

Because it looked like Benson was ordering his Darkwater men to abandon their posts, pulling them off guard-duty.

At first Diego had wondered if Benson was simply reassigning them to a different spot around the Robinson lot, but there was far too much discussion for a simple reshuffling of the guard. There was also some head-scratching and beard-rubbing and clearly mouthed curses from the Darkwater men.

Then Benson had shrugged like it was out of his control, and when the Darkwater men stalked off and got into a black Jeep Liberty parked behind the house, leaving just two members of Robinson's regular security detail watching the empty lot, Diego felt that flicker of hope, like maybe things were turning his way again.

In fact many things had turned Diego's way since the cluster-fuck on the *Rivington*. The biggest break had been when Northrup Capital got bought out by some overseas organization based in the Cayman Islands. Turned out the Northrup brothers had a clause in their operating agreement that if both brothers were ever indisposed at the same time, all investor funds would be temporarily frozen to prevent panicked withdrawals and allow time for Northrup Capital to be sold in an orderly fashion.

And although it had been touch-and-go for a few weeks, this mysterious offshore organization swooped in with enough capital to ease the investors' doubts about whether Northrup had a future. The lock-up period was long enough that even those investors who'd panicked at the news of Kyle and Kenneth's untimely deaths calmed down and decided to hold tight, to keep their money parked where it was generating

obscenely high returns from the money funneled back into it from the American taxpayer via lobbyist-assisted loopholes inserted in Congress-approved aid-packages with a thousand pages of clauses that nobody read, not even the President.

End result was that this new white-knight company from the Caymans had saved the day in a way that seemed almost miraculous, like it was fate stepping in, destiny intervening.

Now Diego hit the open highway and sighed out a breath, letting his face relax as he settled in for the drive to Baltimore. He set the cruise-control to just under the speed limit, then reached for his burner phone and tapped three times on the screen to dial Ernesto, who was Zeta Number 142.

Ernesto was not a great fighter. He was an accountant. Diego had poached him from the Juarez Cartel almost a decade earlier, after a bloody battle that left the Zetas in control of a crucial segment of the Mexico-U.S. border.

“Hola,” came Ernesto’s nervously upbeat voice. “How is your American holiday going?”

Diego grunted. “What news of Northrup Capital?”

Ernesto was silent a moment. Diego heard computer keys being punched on the other end. “There is no more Northrup



Capital. The acquisition is complete, and all funds have been absorbed by our new benefactors.”

“Do we have a name?”

“Si.” More keys being punched. “IMC is the name. International Management Corporation. Registered in Grand Cayman.”

“I already know that,” Diego snapped. “I’ve seen the company registration. It is clearly just a shell, with local Cayman agents listed as the officers. I want to know who is really behind that generic company name.”

Ernesto sighed into the phone. “Nothing on that. Nobody has reached out to us directly yet. It is business as usual. Which is a good thing. They are smart enough to not contact us directly for now. Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Diego exhaled slowly, glancing at his sideview mirror before changing lanes. It had been business as usual ever since Northrup Capital got taken over by IMC. A relief, of course.

But also a mystery.

After all, certainly the owners of IMC were not blind to what Northrup Capital was really up to. The Zeta Nation was just one of many such investments the Northrup brothers had

engineered. There were the Kendos in Western Africa and the Urzis in Eastern Europe and some fringe Islamic group who'd taken over an island near Indonesia or Malaysia.

All those arrangements had been designed the same way by the Northrup brothers: Make sure these “startup countries” positioned themselves as the “lesser of evils” in dangerous parts of the world. Then get “foreign aid” packages slipped into larger bills pushed through Congress by well-paid Washington lobbyists. Issue bonds that pay generous interest using the foreign-aid money. Northrup Capital buys the bonds, thereby getting massive interest payments courtesy of the clueless American taxpayer.

A beautiful scheme, but also a house of cards built upon what Washington lobbyists fondly called “Trojan Horse” bills—large, overly complex bills that contained everything including the kitchen sink and all the fixtures, giving both parties a piece of the pie, thereby guaranteeing it got passed by the House and the Senate, then signed into law by the President—who of course didn't have time to read 3,452 pages of legal nonsense and simply relied on his advisers to tell him where to sign.

But Senator Robinson had repeatedly called out these Trojan Horse bills, was promising to close these loopholes, reduce the influence of paid lobbyists, clean up Congress and make American democracy transparent and easy to understand. That was part of his platform, and it was resonating with the public.

Of course, these Trojan Horse bills benefited both parties, and so a lone Senator's voice meant little when it came to how the Senate and House actually voted. But if Robinson took the White House, he could issue a Presidential Executive Order that could immediately close those loopholes—perhaps not permanently, but long enough to bring down the house of cards on which Zeta Nation was funding itself.

And without that inflow of American money, Zeta Nation could easily be swallowed up by the Colombian or Mexican Cartels, both of which were experiencing a resurgence thanks to the inflow of Chinese money along with the chemical raw materials to make methamphetamine and fentanyl, the new cash-cows of the drug trade.

“Business as usual,” Diego muttered as he slowed down to let a State Trooper with flashing lights pass him. He exhaled as the Trooper zipped down the highway and raced up an exit

ramp. “So our new owners have made no move to sell our bonds to someone else at a discount?”

“Correct. The only change is that now I must deposit the interest payments into a Grand Cayman bank account.”

Ernesto paused, took a quick breath. “But of course, all of it depends on us continuing to receive foreign aid money from the *Yanquis*. We are covered until the end of the year under the last big bill passed by Congress. But we must be included in a Trojan Horse bill for next year too. The Northrups had the connections in Washington. They were paying the lobbyists. They were donating to the Congressmen and Senators. They had the Ivy League degrees and the connections that came with them, Diego. So yes, it is business as usual for now. But next year could be a different story. Especially with the elections and a new American President taking over the White House.”

“We are still writing next year’s story,” Diego said thoughtfully as he saw the signs for Baltimore coming up on his right. “If our new bosses have not attempted to offload us from IMC’s portfolio by now, it means they understand what is going on and are waiting and watching.” He took a breath, thought back to his recon mission at the Robinson homestead.

“Watching to see what happens in the Presidential Primaries. To see whether Robinson wins the nomination.” He rubbed his new beard, tightened his jaw, nodded as the exit to Southeast Baltimore approached. “If Robinson wins the nomination, our new bosses at IMC will almost certainly package up our bonds along with those of the Kendos and the Urzis and everyone else, dump them all and write off the loss. But if we make it so that Robinson is no longer alive to be on the ticket, then perhaps our new bosses will finally reach out to us. Perhaps they will open up a dialog. They might have connections just like the Northrups did. They might have American-based shell companies from which to donate to Congressmen and Senators, to pay lobbyists legally in ways that we cannot from outside the United States.”

“*Si*,” said Ernesto. “Listen, I know one of the Cayman bankers from my days with the Juarez Cartel. He cannot get me any names of the IMC owners, but he has confirmed that IMC has accounts in not just Grand Cayman but also Cyprus. They move large amounts of capital, in the tens of billions every month.”

Another wave of relief passed through Diego, followed by a surge of excitement. Cyprus was a hotbed of underground

banking activity because of privacy laws that rivalled those of the Swiss. In fact, much of the truly dark money had moved to Cyprus over the past decade, thanks to the Swiss bankers bowing to U.S. pressure and revealing their client lists.

Cyprus, on the other hand, was both tighter and looser with their rules, and the little island off the coast of Greece had a bustling shadow economy of shell companies and local agents who rented out offices and answered phones on behalf of these shell companies and their secret owners.

Diego took the Southeast Baltimore exit, listening in silence as Ernesto rattled off instructions to access funds transferred to the United States, money for Diego's extended "vacation" north of the border. Moving money was getting more and more complicated these days, with U.S. banks increasingly freezing accounts with even the smallest sign of sketchiness. But Ernesto was very good at his work, painstakingly maintaining dozens of small bank accounts all over the United States, utilizing regional banks and credit unions, avoiding the mega-banks which were scrutinized much more closely by both U.S. Treasury and the NSA—perhaps the CIA too.

Diego hung up the phone and rubbed his jaw, thoughts of the CIA bringing John Benson's name to mind once more. But he pushed aside the thoughts, told himself again that nobody knew for sure that Zeta Number One was in the United States on holiday.

He grinned at the memory of Ernesto's lighthearted jab about Diego being on vacation. But there was some truth to it, Diego admitted in the privacy of his mind as he took a left turn at the top of the exit ramp and rumbled the van towards the Hispanic neighborhoods of Southeast Baltimore.

Yes, Diego had certainly been enjoying some of the luxuries of the Land of Milk and Honey. Even neighborhoods that were called "ghettoes" by the American elite looked vibrant and thriving to Diego's jaded eyes. He'd grown up in *real* ghettoes down in Mexico City, his childhood home just a shack built from salvaged metal and plywood from one of the city's garbage dumps which were the size of mountains.

Diego had grown up scavenging those dumps for anything that could be sold. That was where he'd first learned how to fight—the garbage dumps were free-for-alls where might was right. He'd seen old women fight ten-year-old girls for the rights to a piece of shiny aluminum or a cardboard box of old

clothes. Many of those fights drew blood. Some of them ended with a body added to the towering mountains of filth.

So yes, perhaps Diego had taken his sweet time getting settled after swimming ashore like a rat, sneaking into the Brooklyn barrios and then making his way to Baltimore. Perhaps moving on Robinson earlier would have been smart, but Diego had held off.

He told himself it was because of the uncertainty of Northrup Capital's takeover. After all, there would be no benefit to killing Senator Robinson if the new owners decided to dump the Zeta Nation's bonds. The money train would come to a crashing halt.

In which case Diego had wondered if he would be better off starting over in the United States.

The admission made his cheeks burn with guilt. Even the thought felt like a betrayal. After years of leading his Zetas like a prophet to the promised land of a Zeta Nation, how could his heart so quickly yearn for the comforts of the United States?

Diego huffed out a breath as he pulled onto Garfield Avenue, not far from the apartment complex with his one-room studio that would be considered a hovel by American



standards but was a palace compared to where Diego had lived with his mother and two sisters for the first eleven years of his life. On his left was a miniature strip mall with a laundromat, a nail salon, two pawn brokers, and a little Mexican convenience store called *Mercy's Place* which sold fresh tamales.

Diego had been in Baltimore two weeks, and he'd visited the little store to buy rolling tobacco and instant coffee and cleaning supplies. The tamales had been a nice surprise, and he'd been coming back almost every day to grab a couple for lunch.

Of course, Diego thought as he pulled into the strip-mall's six-car parking lot, that wasn't the only reason he'd been visiting *Mercy's Place* perhaps a bit more often than necessary.

"Hola," came her voice from behind the counter as Diego walked in.

"Hola, Mercy," he said, trying to sound nonchalant even though the sight of her made his heart hammer inside his chest in a way it hadn't for years, decades, perhaps forever. "How are you?"

Mercy smiled and shrugged, then leaned forward on the glass-topped counter, her round-necked tee-shirt dipping just enough to give him an unintended glimpse of her cleavage.

Diego's eyes darted towards that shadowy space between her brown breasts, and Mercy immediately straightened up and stepped back from the counter, tugging self-consciously at her neckline, blinking several times and then flashing a quick smile. She was perhaps in her mid-thirties, maybe five years younger than Diego, with soft brown eyes that hinted at a distant sadness, a sense of resignation that seemed to tug at something in Diego's cold heart.

He strode past her, cursing himself for glancing down her shirt so obviously. The thought was comical, considering what Diego and his men had done to women over the years—taking what they wanted, when they wanted, how they wanted, again and again. Sex was a weapon in the kind of wars the Zetas had been fighting with the Cartels and the Narcos and the local police and everyone else who got caught in the crossfire. There was no better way to strike dread in the hearts of your potential enemies than by making it very clear what would happen to the women unfortunate enough to be their wives and daughters, their sisters and mothers.

He drew back his thick dark hair, strode to the milk cooler and grabbed a carton of heavy cream to mix into his instant coffee. He took his time in the middle aisle of the three-aisle

convenience store, cursing himself again for giving in to this feeling that had drawn him back here almost every day.

“Tamales are almost ready, if you want to wait a few minutes,” Mercy said in Spanish when Diego placed the carton of cream on the glass counter and dug into his uniformed pocket for cash. “They are steaming in the back.”

Diego gulped back a steaming image of what he'd like to do in the back to Mercy. His eyes flashed with that wildness that usually didn't need to be restrained when he was back with his Zetas, taking the wives and sisters of their enemies with violent relish.

“I have to get back to work,” he said gruffly, placing a crumpled ten-dollar bill on the counter.

Mercy popped open the cash register, glancing at his uniform as she made change. “You do building maintenance, yes?” she asked, handing him his change and smiling up at him, a glimmer of something in those storm-cloudy eyes.

Diego grunted out a yes, cursing inwardly again for coming in here in this damn fake uniform. He shoved the change into his pocket, was about to grab the carton of cream when Mercy snatched it away and turned to the back counter so she could bag it in brown paper.

Diego swallowed hard, taking in the sight of her pleasantly round ass as she bagged his cream on the back counter. He stiffened in his pants, his throat tightening along with his damn balls. This was dangerous, he knew. He needed to stay invisible, and part of that meant not going to the same store every fucking day, seeing the same people every day, talking to the same damn woman every day.

Take your stupid carton of cream, go back to your apartment, jerk yourself off picturing that ass bouncing on your cock, those tits slapping you in the face, those sad eyes gazing into yours as you come.

The image was vivid and wild, and Diego felt his restraint weaken as Mercy turned around and placed the brown-bagged cream on the counter. She was close enough that he could smell the warm aroma of her body, the subtle scent of her floral perfume mixing with a hint of perspiration from the steamy work of making those tamales.

“Do you know about plumbing?” she asked.

Diego blinked twice, frowned once, then remembered his damn uniform and the question about being a maintenance man. “Sure,” he muttered, grabbing the cream and turning to go.

“The faucet in the back has a leak,” she said, blinking and averting her eyes shyly. “I tried to fix it but made it worse. The plumber charges eighty dollars minimum. Perhaps you can take a look and I will pay you forty?” She shrugged, flashed a hesitant smile. “Plus a free tamale? It is pork belly today. Soft and succulent.”

Diego swallowed hard, forced himself to turn back in Mercy’s direction. From the side of his vision he could see the front door, the late morning sun streaming through the thick glass, casting a glow that made everything feel surreal, like things were shifting around Diego, like the universe was opening up two paths for him, fate forcing him to choose, destiny daring him to pick.

The feeling almost made his head spin, and Diego wasn’t certain what was coming over him. He stood there frozen, staring at Mercy, into those sad eyes that did something to him, to the man in him, a man who had brought much sadness into the world, done it like it was his mission, his calling, his fate, his destiny.

But right now it felt like fate was twisting inside him, destiny turning outside him, spinning up new possibilities, new pathways, all of it opening up ever since Diego had

boarded the *Rivington* in the darkest part of the night, crossed paths with that coyote John Benson, a man who'd popped up in Diego's life again today, like the bastard was somehow pulling the strings of Diego's fate, changing the path of Diego's destiny, perhaps doing it without even knowing it.

And then, before Diego knew it, he found himself smiling and shrugging and turning away from the front door, following Mercy into the back, making a choice that felt like he was leaving something behind, starting something new.

This was something new to Ice.

Not sitting up all night and staring at a closed door, ready in case someone was dumb enough to come through it. Nah, he'd done that a hundred times before.

Just never with his attention elsewhere.

Behind another door.

The door to that bedroom.

Ice stood from the hard-cushioned sofa, stretching his body and then striding over to the front door of the hotel suite. He peered through the spyhole at the hallway outside. Nothing stirring. No room-service carts rolling down the hall. It was too late for midnight snacks, too early for coffee and breakfast.

He stepped away from the front door, paced the carpet like he'd been doing intermittently for hours. The drapes were still closed. The air-conditioning was back on.

But the heat still burned in Ice.

“Damn it, you shouldn't have let that happen,” Ice muttered, turning at the far end of the hotel suite's living room and stalking back towards the closed bedroom door. He

stopped outside the door, listened for Indy's gentle snores that told him she was still in la-la land.

He exhaled when he heard her rhythmic, deep breathing come through the door. Stroked his stubbly chin and continued his sentinel-march that had flattened the carpet fibers into a lonely pathway down the center of the suite.

After Benson had hung up Ice had quickly taken charge, deciding that they would leave in the morning but without checking out of the hotel. He trusted Benson's word that the Darkwater alias was solid, but Ice's image would have been captured at airport immigration on his way in, and it wasn't a stretch to assume that NSA had access to pretty much every airport CCTV feed in the civilized world. In that case, with today's computing power and artificial intelligence programs, it would be almost trivial for NSA facial-recognition to match his face to an Army mugshot that popped up with the name Michael "Ice" Wagner.

And since the Indians had stamped his fake passport and logged it into their system, NSA would easily be able to link Ice's Darkwater alias with his real name.

After that it wouldn't take much to run a search through Mumbai's hotel databases to see if anything clicked.



And someone high up in Langley would absolutely have access to anything NSA could provide.

Ice should have connected the dots sooner, but he didn't beat himself up over that too much. He'd have probably come to the Raj Palace Hotel anyway. First because the hotel had tight security, including a metal detector and baggage-scanner at the front entrance. Ice had snuck in his guns by dismantling the weapons and packing the parts in X-ray proof compartments of his military-issue duffel. That trick wouldn't work with modern airport scanners, but there was no problem with most hotels.

Sure, a local wet-team could use the same trick to sneak in a handgun or two, but there was no way anyone was bringing heavy weaponry into a swanky hotel like this. That was enough of an advantage for Ice. Especially if he knew someone was coming.

And that was the second reason Ice would have checked into the Raj Palace anyway.

To set a trap for this mystery mastermind back in Langley.

Force him to use his CIA tech hacker-contact to track Ice down. Then force him to activate another wet team or local CIA asset.

Because now Benson and Ice were both watching and waiting.

Ice finished another round of the room, stretching his arms out wide, cracking his knuckles, then sliding out his phone and swiping his fingerprint to wake it up. He'd been exchanging messages with Benson, who'd agreed that it was worth a shot to stay overnight at the Raj Palace as bait. But Benson had also made it damn clear he wanted Ice and Indy gone by morning. There was no reason to force a confrontation with a CIA asset who might just be doing his or her job.

“I think I know who set Indy up,” Benson had messaged. “But I want to get to his internal CIA tech contact before moving in on him. Don't want any more collateral damage than what's absolutely necessary. This guy is a master manipulator with zero hesitation when it comes to covering his tracks. I suspect his tech contact doesn't know she's being used to bring down Kaiser, which means she might be in danger if this guy sniffs me getting too close.”

Ice had frowned at the message. Benson had referred to the tech contact as a *she*. Ice didn't ask any more questions. The cat-and-mouse game being played in Langley was Benson's mission.

Ice's own mission was clear.

He had his own *she* to worry about.

To keep safe.

To bring home alive.

Maybe bring home forever.

Now Ice stopped in front of the bedroom door again. He'd left the bedroom shortly after Benson and Jack had hung up after ribbing him for being hog-tied on the damn bathroom floor.

Left the bedroom as fast as he damn well could.

Without looking too long into Indy O'Donnell's sharp dark eyes.

Because he already knew what he'd see in those eyes.

Knew what he'd feel in his heart.

Knew it was a bad fucking idea.

"Damn it," he growled under his breath, clenching both fists as he stood outside the bedroom door. A part of him wanted to quietly push that door open, stalk silently to that big bed, slip smoothly beneath the cool sheets, give in to the hot desire raging in him like a beast. "You lost control, you dumb

shit. You rubbed yourself off on her like an animal. Came in your pants like an out-of-control teenager.”

And hell, a part of him *felt* like that out-of-control teenager. His head buzzed from the memory of their bodies pressed together, the way her soft breasts and hard nipples felt against his chest, the way her pulsing mound felt against his throbbing bulge, the way her lips tasted as he ravaged her with his kisses, marked her with his saliva, throttled her with his tongue.

Ice cursed again as he turned away from the door, closing his eyes tight to push away the vivid memory of how Indy had looked at him when he told her to get some sleep while he stood guard near the front door.

And he hated what he'd seen in her eyes.

Hated what he'd felt in his soul.

Because turning away from her felt like a betrayal.

Like his body had made a promise to hers.

A promise he was breaking.

Ice rubbed his eyes and shook his head to clear it. Stop being absurd, he told himself angrily. You lost control and did

something that was stupid and unprofessional at best,  
downright despicable at worst.

Now *that's* fucking absurd, came the raging argument from  
inside Ice's frazzled mind. She kissed you back, didn't she?  
She came just as hard as you, didn't she?

But Ice had opened that door in his mind, and the guilt  
roared in like floodwaters, reminding him how he'd held her  
down and used her, satisfied his raw raging need like an  
animal in season.

And the fucked-up thing was that the need still raged, was  
still raw like an open wound.

Like the animal in him hadn't been satisfied at all.

It had just been awakened.

And it was hungry for more.

Hungry for it all.

Just open that bedroom door, growled that beast.

She wants you and you know it, whispered that wolf.

Make her yours like your body wants, panted that predator.

Now Ice almost shouted out loud as his temples throbbed  
like his skull wanted to split in two. He slammed the base of

his palm against the side of his head, doing it again and again like a madman as he stalked through the room like a caged lion driven insane from going back and forth over his own footsteps, his own thoughts, his own desires.

Then the phone buzzed against his thigh, startling him back from the abyss his thoughts were spinning him towards. He yanked the phone out of his cargo flap.

It was Jack, and Ice had never been happier to see his kid brother's oversized profile picture grinning back at him. He strode over to the far side of the suite, pulled open the window drapes, gazed out over the grayish haze of smog-clouds and street-lights that lay over the city like a blanket.

"Now what?" said Ice, doing his best to mask his relief, his gratitude that Jack had rescued him from his own thoughts.

"Now I want to know what's really going on with you and that woman," came Jack's crackling voice. "Benson conferenced me in cold. I had no idea he was listening in on you until I heard that shit about the rubbing-post."

Ice groaned and rubbed his eyes. Now he regretted taking Jack's call. "Rubbing-post. Right. So you just called to rub my face in it. Fine. Laugh it out, Jack. Just remember that soon

enough you'll have to see me in person, and I will make damn sure to wipe that jackass grin off your ugly face.”

Jack chuckled wickedly, then took a loud breath and sighed it out equally loudly. “I’m already laughed out, man. That’s why I waited three hours to call you. Had to catch my breath. Replenish my electrolytes.”

Ice gazed out over the smog-covered city, then sighed and pulled the drapes closed again. Daybreak was still a couple of hours away. If nothing else, listening to Jack bust his balls would keep him alert.

“Where are you?” Ice asked. “Still watching over the Senator and his family in DC?”

“Negative. Benson pulled us off guard duty.”

Ice frowned. “Why?”

“Said it wasn’t his decision. Senator asked Benson to do it.”

“You didn’t say something stupid and piss off the Senator or his wife, did you, Jack?”

Jack chuckled. “Nah, I save all my smack-talk for you.” He took a breath, exhaled into the phone. “Benson says the Senator doesn’t want to be associated with Darkwater right

now. His regular security detail has a couple of Army veterans. They've been hearing things about Darkwater." He paused a beat. "Not all of them good."

Ice rubbed his jaw. "Not surprising. I warned you to stay away from Benson and Darkwater. Now we're both in it, and —"

"Nobody put a gun to your head," Jack interrupted sharply. "I don't need you watching my ass. Joining Darkwater was your own damn choice." Jack took a breath, and when he exhaled Ice knew that shit-eating grin had broken wide on his kid brother's face again. "And I'd bet you a thousand push-ups you'd make the same choice if you could do it over. Am I wrong?"

Ice's jaw tightened. He glanced across the room at the bedroom door. Thought about what lay beyond it, resting peacefully between silky smooth sheets, safe because Ice was standing guard, watching over her like a sentinel stalking the perimeter.

He didn't take Jack's bet.

Ice knew he'd lose.



Of course, he couldn't admit that to the grinning jackass, so Ice just moved on.

“So what's Benson got you doing now?”

Jack sighed. “Nothing. I mean, we're still all hunting this guy Diego officially. Or unofficially, I guess. Hell, nobody's even certain it was him on that ship. Hogan only got a brief glimpse of the guy in the dark. And Hannah got choked from behind. She barely remembers what the guy looked like.” He sighed again. “Benson's certain it's him, though. Says Diego wouldn't trust this mission to anyone else. Apparently, the Zetas expect their leaders to be hands-on.”

Ice nodded, peered through the spyhole into the hallway again. It was still clear, and he went to the hard-cushioned sofa and sprawled lengthwise on it, his boots hanging over the armrest, eyes facing the closed bedroom door.

“Did Benson bring the FBI in on this? Secret Service? Local police?”

“Negative,” said Jack. “FBI and NYPD helped search the harbor and shoreline after that mess on the *Rivington*, but there was no sign of anyone making it ashore. No body washed up anywhere. Benson let the issue drop. You know how it is with

these CIA guys. FBI and police cramp their style. Too many rules.”

Ice grunted in agreement. He knew damn well that the CIA and FBI didn’t always see eye to eye—especially on trivial things like probable cause, due process, and basic human rights.

And the cold hard truth was that Ice sometimes preferred the CIA rulebook.

What happens in the shadows, stays in the shadows.

Because sometimes the American people don’t need to know what goes on in those shadows.

They don’t need to know what it takes to keep them safe.

Like Churchill supposedly said: We sleep soundly in our beds because there are rough men who stand ready in the night to visit violence upon those who would do us harm.

And Ice was one of those rough men standing ready in the dark to visit violence upon those who would do harm.

Do harm to what lay peacefully in bed beyond that door.

“So Benson hasn’t given you any specific orders?” Ice asked. “How is he organizing the hunt for Diego? Who’s in charge?”

“Ax and Edge are calling the shots on day-to-day operations. Fay and Hannah are handling logistics, finances, database access, aliases.” Jack sighed. “But it’s a bit messy right now. There was a woman—Nancy Sullivan—who handled all of that stuff.”

“Yeah, she was at Hogan and Hannah’s wedding. She’s Brenna’s mom, right?”

“Yeah. She was also Benson’s right-hand woman for the past seven years. Benson’s a bit lost at sea without her. Fay and Hannah are trying their best to take over Nancy’s responsibilities, but it’s going to be a while before things settle down.”

Ice was quiet for a bit. It wasn’t clear why Nancy had quit Darkwater, and it didn’t seem appropriate to ask the other guys or their wives at the wedding.

“Fay’s in close contact with Nancy, though,” Jack continued. “They’ve both been helping Kaiser and his wife Alice get settled with the twins they just adopted.”

Ice frowned up at the ceiling. He’d heard about the twins from Fay and Fox. After all, Fay was their aunt. Her sister Maya had died in childbirth, and somehow Benson had

convinced Kaiser and his estranged wife to adopt the orphaned twins.

It was a tangled web of connections that crossed agencies and organizations, blurring the personal with the professional, the past with the future, Ice thought as he stared a hole into the ceiling.

Yeah, a tangled web of coincidences and connections.

And John Benson was the spider at the center of that web.

“Still haven’t answered my question,” came Jack’s goading voice from where the phone was balanced on Ice’s chest. “Given the situation you’re in, would you make the same choice to join Darkwater if you could do it over? I say you would. Including whatever dumb-ass choices you made that got you hog-tied to the bathroom pipes.” He chuckled into the phone. “Maybe *especially* that choice. Rubbing-post and all.”

Now Ice cracked a grin that he was glad Jack would never see. He was about to hang up without confirming or denying anything, but then another man’s voice came through from Jack’s end of the line.

Ice brought the phone closer to his ear. It was Keller, one of the other new Darkwater guys. Keller was somewhat of a mystery so far. He was also former Delta, but he'd left the Army almost a decade earlier. Ice himself had never crossed paths with the guy, never even heard his name. His military record was bare-bones, almost non-existent.

Which made Ice think Keller had been poached by the CIA early on in his Delta career.

And when Jack had dropped Keller's name around some older Delta guys a few weeks ago, their response pretty much confirmed Ice's suspicion that Keller had been recruited by the spooks.

"Keller the Killer," one of those Delta veterans had replied. "Broke a guy's neck on a training exercise. They wrote up the death as accidental, but nobody believed it. He was gone within weeks after that. Good fucking riddance."

There was nothing in Keller's file about him causing someone's death—accidental or otherwise. Which pretty much guaranteed CIA swooped in and snatched him up, forgave his sins, purged his record.

And now Benson had brought Keller the Killer into Darkwater?

Had Benson been the guy who recruited Keller into the CIA all those years ago?

Just like he'd recruited Indy O'Donnell into the CIA?

Too many connections.

Too many coincidences.

Too many fucking "signs from the universe."

"I'm signing off, big brother," came Jack's voice. "Keller and I are heading to Baltimore. If Diego's in the country and he's after the Senator, chances are good he's in the DC-Baltimore area. Benson doesn't think he'll try to hit the Senator on the campaign trail. Too many bystanders and cameras. So we're focusing on DC-Maryland-Virginia. Cody and Edge are going to follow some leads in DC and Virginia. We're covering Baltimore. Stay safe, Ice. Oh, and you owe me a thousand push-ups."

"I don't remember taking that bet," Ice growled through a grin. "Sure as hell don't remember losing it."

Jack's only response was to snort out a laugh and then hang up the phone. Ice chuckled out a breath as Jack's profile picture faded into black nothingness.

Then Ice heard a noise.

He leapt to his feet.

The bedroom door was open.

Indy stood in the doorway.

“Have you been standing all this while?” Indy stepped through the doorway, squinting from the lights blazing all over the suite’s living room. “Did you get any rest at all?”

Ice shrugged noncommittally, didn’t answer her question. “It’s four in the morning. Go back to bed. We’ve got a long day ahead.”

Indy frowned, hugged herself and rubbed her arms. Ice stood like a statue in the middle of the room, almost at attention, his eyes wide and alert. She’d caught him without his shades, and she frowned again when she saw a subtle flinch in those dark green eyes.

She shook her head and smiled, running her fingers through her sleep-tussled hair. “I know it’s four in the morning. I set my alarm to wake up at four. It’s my shift. Go inside and crash out till dawn. I’ll keep watch.”

Ice chuckled, shook his head back at her. “I’m good.” He stretched out his arms, his shoulder-joints cracking in a strangely satisfying way. He took two steps towards her, stopped to reach for the sunglasses sitting on the side-table. He put them on, shrugged again, then turned away from her and



strolled to the window, pulling the drapes open a crack and peering out at the dark city like he was Batman watching for the signal. “Go back to bed.”

Indy’s frown cut deeper. She glanced back through the open bedroom door. It was a king-sized bed. Ice was a big man, but they could both easily fit on the bed with about a foot of space between them.

If that’s what Ice was so worried about.

Heaven forbid they slept in the same damn bed.

“OK, you’re being childish,” Indy snapped, her temper flashing as that earlier feeling of humiliation mixed with indignation surged briefly. Ice was clearly overcompensating to make it seem like what happened earlier didn’t matter, perhaps didn’t even happen. “Look, you can forget about what happened earlier, if that’s why you’re so tense. I’m not going to tell tales. It happened in the moment, and the moment has passed. There. Now quit acting childish and just get some rest.”

Ice didn’t turn from the window. Indy glared at his broad back, considered asking him what was so damn interesting in the early morning smog. Somehow she managed to stay quiet

long enough for that surge of indignation to subside. A part of her realized she was being childish too.

Childish for feeling slightly hurt at how Ice had clearly made the decision to switch off, to do that annoyingly efficient flip from hot to cold, fire to freezing.

Just like his damn name.

“Fine, suit yourself.” Indy strode over to the couch, plopped herself down at one end, plonked her bare heels on the coffee table, then snatched up the hotel phone and dialed the reception desk. “Hi, do you have 24-hour laundry service? Great. Can you send someone up to collect my clothes? I’ll have them bagged and hanging outside on the door handle in about five minutes. Thank you so much.’

She hung up, sighed, then stood from the sofa and stretched. She glanced over at the silent man-mountain staring through the drapes. He turned to her just as she allowed the smirk to break on her face.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded through a scowl. “We’re leaving at dawn. You planning to go on the run naked?”

“You wish,” she replied coolly, strolling towards the bedroom door, beyond which lay the sprawling bathroom with its oversized shower-stall and three showerheads, one of which was at a very suggestive height. “I need a shower. They’ll have my clothes back in three hours. Hotel service in this country is the best in the world. So relax.”

Ice stepped away from the window, letting the drapes close behind him. “You want a shower, go ahead. But you aren’t sending your clothes away. They won’t be back in time. Rule number one on a mission is to never get caught with your boots off.”

Indy glanced at her bare toes, wiggled those piggies at him, then smiled and shrugged. “A bit late for that. I won’t be long. There’ll be plenty of time for you to clean up when I’m done.”

Ice rumbled out a breath. “I’m good.”

“Really?” Indy shot a glance at the front of Ice’s black combat pants. There were definitely signs of whitish residue that looked suspiciously crusty. She flicked her gaze back to his shaded eyes as a tingle of something raced up the back of her legs, made her think about that protruding showerhead that

was just the right height. “Suit yourself. You know where to find me.”

Those last words slipped out past her lips faster than she could stop them. She hadn't meant to say that at all. It sounded like an invitation, and that was most certainly *not* what she'd intended.

It wasn't, was it?

“Oh, hey, quick question,” came Ice's voice as she turned towards the dark bedroom and the big bathroom. “How exactly is your soon-to-be-naked ass planning to hang your bagged-up clothes outside the room door? Not to mention receive them when they get back. Because I'm sure as hell not your damn butler.”

Indy froze, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. Thankfully she had her back to him, but she could almost hear him grinning behind her.

Now she was trapped. The easy solution was to forget about the laundry. She could just take that hot shower, get back into the same clothes, panties included.

Panties that had been uncomfortably sticky when she went to bed.

Panties that had been just as sticky when she woke up warm and sweaty beneath the bedclothes.

Panties that felt suspiciously stickier right now.

Now as she contemplated her next move.

Now as she dared herself to make that move.

A move that would either break his ice-cold frame.

Or send her own dignity down in flames.

Suddenly her heat flared up, and it was only when she forced herself to consider what she was thinking that Indy realized she *wasn't* thinking.

Not clearly, at least.

“There are like twenty towels and at least two bathrobes stacked near the shower,” she informed him without turning, without daring to look at him lest her eyes and her lips and her mouth reveal what she’d briefly considered in that moment of hot madness. She held her casually cool frame, padded barefoot towards the bathroom, making sure not to rush.

Then Indy felt something rush past her.

It was Ice, and he thundered into the bathroom and emerged a second later clutching two big armfuls of towels

and bathrobes and washcloths and napkins, perhaps even the darn shower-curtain mixed into his haul.

“The towels are all mine,” he informed her with an impressively straight face as Indy stared in wide-eyed disbelief. “So are the bathrobes. And the washcloths. Napkins too.”

Indy blinked away her surprise as her heart thumped behind her breasts. She watched him stomp past her with his plundered treasure. Then she scampered to the bed and began dragging the bedclothes off it to wrap herself up once she disrobed.

“Those are mine too,” Ice shouted, dropping the stack of towels and dashing over to the bed. He grabbed the bedclothes and wrenched them out of Indy’s giggly hands, bunching them up feverishly, then carrying them over to his stack of towels and smushing the mountain of crumpled cloth together.

Indy’s entire body quivered with laughter as Ice somehow managed to keep his lips tight and unsmiling as he gathered up a ball of cloth bigger than himself and tried to escape through the bedroom door with it.

After some squeezing and grunting he made it out into the living room, and when he turned Indy saw the smile tease the

corners of his mouth as Ice tried to keep it in.

“You’re ridiculous,” she informed him through a rush of giggles. “I thought your earlier behavior was childish, but this is downright infantile. What are we, six years old?”

Ice grinned like he couldn’t hold it back any longer. He let the massive pile of white cloth drop to the carpet, then dived into the clump, rolled around in it, finally laying on his back and pretending to make snow angels.

Indy’s heart thrummed as she watched this stone-cold killer act like a six-year-old boy celebrating a snow-day. She knew what was happening, understood that this was Ice’s way of communicating what he couldn’t articulate, couldn’t find the words to express.

Perhaps because there *were* no words to express what they were both feeling right now.

Because the only word that seemed appropriate was also unspeakable.

*Love.*

Which of course was eminently impossible.

Positively preposterous.

Rambunctiously ridiculous.

But Indy couldn't stop the feeling, couldn't stop the word from echoing in her head, couldn't stop herself from giggling like a goose at this monster of a man grinning at her from a pile of towels that he'd claimed was his.

And perhaps that wasn't the only thing which was his.

Indy blinked away the blush from her cheeks. She shrugged away the smile from her lips. It was her move now and she knew it.

So without another word Indy turned and strolled to the bathroom.

Closed the door and locked it.

Took off her top.

Popped open her bra.

Pushed down her pants.

Stepped out of her panties.

Stuffed the soiled clothes into a plastic laundry bag.

Took a deep breath as she considered that next move.

Took another breath as she slowly unlocked the door.

Her heart hammered behind her boobs as she pulled the door open a crack and prepared to dash to the front door,



naked as the day she was born.

And then her heart sank to her toes when she realized she couldn't do it.

She couldn't put herself out there like that.

Not when Ice was so hot and cold, on and off, grumpy and flirty, unabashedly affectionate one moment, unreadably aloof the next.

Now that lighthearted flirty mood suddenly turned heavy for Indy. She'd made the mistake of *thinking* instead of just *doing*, and Indy knew she was done for. She was pulling back into her shell, mortified that she'd even *considered* going out there naked like a newborn, butt and boobs bouncing as she scampered across the carpet with her balled-up clothes.

Indy stared at the crack in the door. Some part of her dared her to do it anyway, to stop thinking and just act, to just run out there and take a chance.

But that part was too timid, too small, too reserved to actually do it.

Not when Ice had walked out of that bedroom under some pretext of keeping watch at the damn front door.

Not when he'd acted all gruff and growly when she'd offered him a chance to get some rest by her side.

But then she'd made that comment about "you know where to find me" and Ice's expression had suddenly turned from a grump to a grin.

It wasn't *that* fast, Indy told herself as her shoulders slumped and she sighed out a defeated breath. And just because he teased you and got all flirty with the whole towel thing doesn't mean he actually wants to do for a second time what he insists was a mistake the first time.

And it doesn't mean anything even if he *does* want to, came Indy's smarty-pants logical voice in her head. It won't mean anything, can't mean anything. Don't get pulled into some fantasy, you silly chicken. In the end *you're* the one who's going to get hurt. He's already shown that he's moody and unreadable with the ability to switch on and off like it's nothing, like *you're* nothing.

Now Indy's head was spinning. She sniffed her underarms and decided that she was stinky and if he came in here now he'd jump back and slam the door shut and lock her inside until she was shampooed and soaped.

Another sigh as the doubts and debates raged inside her sharp analytical mind, slicing and dicing the actions and reactions.

But some part of her still kept that door open a crack, buying herself time, perhaps buying *him* time.

After all, Ice knew where to find her.

All he had to do was take about ten steps past the open bedroom door.

Now her pesky heart starting thumping again, and Indy peeked through the cracked door at the bedroom beyond.

It was still empty.

No signs of an intruder.

No sounds of a stalker.

No shadow of a monster.

The mood dropped again, and this time it triggered that awfully familiar mix of humiliation and indignation. To hell with him, Indy thought as she glanced at the bag of clothes by her feet. She tossed the bag out into the bedroom. The laundry service person would knock, and Ice would have to answer. He'd see the bag of clothes outside the bathroom door. He'd grab them and hand them over.

And even if he didn't, Indy decided with a pouty-faced shrug, she'd just shower and blow-dry herself and wear the same clothes again if she had to. Whatever. It didn't matter. She'd just been set up to look like a traitor, had come *this* close to being killed by a CIA wet-team, was by no means out of danger and in the clear yet.

And she was worried about sticky panties and laundry-service?

Priorities, you dumb duckling.

So with one last sigh Indy closed the door.

She didn't slam it shut but didn't bother to be quiet either, letting it close with a clearly audible *thud*.

Like a part of her wanted to send a message.

Maybe send an invitation.

OK, *stop*, she scolded herself. He had his chance and he didn't take it. He's probably sitting there on the couch staring at the front door, polishing his guns, sharpening his blades. He's probably waiting to hear the shower come on before he brings the towels back and leaves them outside the bathroom. That little flirty game is over. It may have felt like you were teenagers, but guess what, you *aren't* a damn teenager, this

*isn't* a fucking romantic weekend in an exotic hotel, and Ice *won't* lose control for a second time.

No matter how bad he wants to.

No matter how bad you want him to.

Indy stared at the closed bathroom door, her gaze resting on the brass deadbolt beneath the shining knob. She rubbed the back of her neck, wondering if she should leave it unlocked, just in case Ice flipped that switch back on, decided to stand guard a bit closer to her soapy, shiny, sudsy body.

For a moment that hint of flirty-fun-Indy almost broke through, but then the serious-smart-Indy part popped its smarty-pants head up and reminded everyone what the rational, sensible, serious choice was in this situation.

It was over, Indy decided. Grow up and get your head straight, she told herself.

Then she slid the heavy deadbolt across the door and locked it tight, turned to the shower, shrugged at that third brass showerhead which was just the right height, sticking straight out of the wall, its big head ready and raised.

Ice raised his head from the pile of towels and frowned.

He didn't feel right.

It wasn't his gut. That had settled down just fine.

It wasn't his head. That was clear like a bell.

It was his heart. It pounded like a hammer behind his breastbone, pumping furious-hot blood through every artery in his tensed-up body, making every vein throb as the blood roared through bulging muscles and pulsing organs.

Including that major organ between his damn legs.

Ice stared through the open bedroom door to where Indy had tossed that plastic laundry bag with her sticky-sweet panties tucked inside, the wetness telling the tale of what she'd felt when she'd come beneath him, when she'd thrashed while he held her down and ground his cock into her mound.

Ice swallowed hard at the memory. He rolled over so he was now lying on his stomach on the pile of towels, the cloth-mountain a ravaged mess after he'd made snow-angels on it like a kid on Christmas Eve.

“You dumb fuck,” he growled, propping himself up on his elbows and then slowly getting to his feet. He ran his fingers through his hair, rubbed his stubble, then yanked off his sunglasses and tossed them onto the sofa. “You’re on the job, you stupid shit. You’re up against some unknown CIA spook who’s probably smarter than you, more experienced than you, more connected than you, maybe even more ruthless than you. Can’t do much about experience or intelligence or connections on short notice. But you can damn well control your mind. Control your emotions. Stay cold and dispassionate.”

Except Ice couldn’t stay cold and dispassionate around Indy. She’d melted him in ways Ice had never experienced with a woman. He tried to tell himself it was the situation, not the woman.

But his heart told him otherwise.

Told him it was all about the woman.

Nothing but the woman.

His damn woman.

Ice cursed out loud once more, forced his gaze away from that bathroom door. He snatched up a towel from the pile,

folded it nice and tight, placed it on the sofa. Then he grabbed another towel from the carpet, did the same.

Soon the messy pile was transformed into a neat stack of perfectly folded towels on the sofa. The act of folding was an exercise in turning chaos into order, and Ice's heart slowed and his breathing steadied and that coolness started to take over again, that switch flipping him from a raging hot mess to what was at least a semblance of controlled calmness.

Then came the knock at the door, and Ice's blood rose again when he remembered that plastic bag outside the bathroom. He took a breath, held it in, moved silently towards the door, glanced through the spyhole.

It was a skinny older male staff member wearing the hotel's brown uniform. He stood back away from the door to make sure he was clearly visible through the spyhole.

Ice sighed, vaguely disappointed that it wasn't an assassin. Fighting for his life would be a welcome distraction right now. It would make the decision for him.

The decision not to enter that hot steamy bathroom.

"Just a minute," Ice grumbled through the door. He turned and placed his hands on his hips, sighed again, then strode to



the bedroom and snatched up the plastic laundry bag.

Before he turned to head back out, he glanced at the bathroom's doorknob. It was big and brassy, shining like it was hot from the steam behind that door. Ice gulped back a fierce urge to see if the door was unlocked.

If that invitation was still open.

*You know where to find me*, she'd said to him.

Had it just slipped out or had she meant it that way?

Could Ice take the chance that it had in fact been an invitation?

No.

Because he might be wrong.

What happened earlier might not have meant what Ice thought it meant.

What Ice hoped it meant.

Stop it, you cock-brained beast, he told himself angrily as he stomped back out of the bedroom, that plastic bag clutched in his fist, swinging wildly by his side as the blood throbbed in his temples, that earlier coolness suddenly gone, that heat once again raging inside his tight body like a river gone wild.

It was only when he was halfway across the room that Ice realized the laundry bag felt a bit light. He turned, then groaned when he saw that he'd been holding it upside down as he stomped away from the bedroom like an angry gorilla. The drawstring had been loose, and now there was a trail of clothes leading all the way back to the bathroom door.

Leading all the way back to her.

Shaking his head with exasperated amusement, Ice snatched up Indy's crumpled clothes one by one. The black stretch pants were first, then her top, followed by her bra, with the panties as the last stop.

And Ice's heart almost stopped when he picked up those crumply rolled-up black panties. The scent rose up to him like sweet perfume, a flower in full bloom, a musk that made him swoon. He swallowed thick down his throat, stiffened hard down his pants, gritted his teeth until they squeaked, tightened his jaw until it twitched.

"You're a pervert," Ice muttered as he stared at the panties in his fist. The urge to bring them to his face was strong, and he swallowed heavily as a delicious sickness rippled through his body. He shot a quick glance at the bathroom door, wondered what Indy would think if she stepped out now and

saw him standing there with her panties in his face, his nostrils flared like a bull in heat as he inhaled her sex like it was a drug, a secret potion. “Get a grip, you sick bastard.”

Ice gripped those panties so hard he could feel the wetness squeeze into his fingers. It took a supreme effort of will to not give in to that savage urge to sniff her sex, swallow her sweetness, taste her tang. With a snarl Ice managed to shove those honey-soaked panties into that plastic bag. He yanked the drawstring closed so hard it broke off in his hand.

A head-shake later Ice had managed to hand the bag to the patiently-waiting attendant. He watched the man walk briskly to the service elevator all the way down the empty hallway. Then Ice closed the room door and locked it with the deadbolt and the chain.

He leaned against the closed door, exhaled hard, wiped the beads of sweat that had pooled on his brow. He glanced at the air-conditioning controls. They were working just fine. The heat was coming from inside him.

“Your nickname is Ice,” he reminded himself with a forced chuckle. “Act like it.”

But the temperature stayed turned up inside Ice’s body. That unintentional encounter with Indy’s panties had gotten to

him in a visceral, physical, primal way. He was dangerously erect in his pants now, hard like concrete, thick like a tree trunk. There was something building inside him, and it needed to get out.

Ice forced his gaze away from the open pathway leading to the bathroom door, from that shiny brass doorknob that whispered he was just a few steps and one turn of the wrist away from what he wanted, what he needed, what he fucking *craved*.

Once again it took a shocking effort of will to stand his ground, and it was only when Ice glanced at his silent black phone on the side-table that he understood why he was so turned around, so worked up, so messed up, like something was ready to explode.

It was because Benson had told Ice to stand down, to end the interrogation because there was no need to “work her” anymore.

But there was still a dark need that lived inside Ice.

A need to finish what he'd started.

A need to end that game of dominance that had begun when he'd slammed Indy into a wall, pushed her down to her

knees, dragged her across the floor by her hair, held her down with his hands and his body as she snarled and spit.

But refused to submit.

Now Ice shut his eyes tight and clenched his jaw. The burning need scared the hell out of him.

The need to win that game of dominance.

A game that he was losing, if he really thought about it.

After all, he'd done what she wanted just now, hadn't he?

He'd taken her clothes out to the attendant like a good soldier, an obedient servant, a damn butler, just like she'd wanted.

He'd done her bidding.

Lost his frame of dominance.

And now he was standing here driving himself insane with the age-old question that separated the men from the boys, the alphas from the betas, the wolves from the sheep:

Does she or doesn't she?

Will she or won't she?

Should I or shouldn't I?

*You know where to find me*, echoed that whisper in his head.

“Yeah,” Ice growled, his eyes narrowing to slits, his fists clenching to hammerheads, his boots turning in the direction of that bathroom door. “Yeah, I know where to find you.”

Within moments Ice was back outside that door, the need to enter surging in him. He took several long deep breaths, blinking away that little voice of reason that whispered if he crossed this threshold and she didn't want it, then he was seriously compromising his frame, compromising their working relationship, destroying their mutual trust, putting them both in danger because this mission wasn't over yet, was in fact just getting started.

Yeah, you need to stand down, warned that part of him. He wasn't thinking straight, was overcome with a need that was unprofessional at best, downright predatory at worst.

After all, only a narcissistic predator would so completely misinterpret a woman's invitation, misread her words, misuse her trust.

All right listen, Ice told himself as he took another hot trembling breath. Just try the door. If that really was an invitation, if she really does want you to enter, then she'll have

left it unlocked. So just try the door and there's your answer. That's the test, Ice. That's what tells you loud and clear if she wants you or not, if that earlier thing was real or not, if that scent on her sex was proof or not.

Proof of what exactly, Ice asked himself as he reached for the doorknob and gripped it without turning, letting the anticipation build to breaking point, the heat surging up his body to his arm until he almost saw smoke rising from where his fingertips touched the brass.

No answer came to his question. Not in words, at least.

Because the only word that echoed inside his skull was a word that didn't make sense, couldn't make sense, in fact had *never* made sense to Ice.

*Love.*

Ice's heart thundered inside him as the word ripped through his consciousness like a blade. Blood rushed to his temples, making his head thunder, making his vision blur, making his grip on that doorknob tighten and twist.

He turned the knob.

Pushed at the door.

It was locked.

And Ice's thundering heart almost exploded in his chest.

He staggered away from the door like he'd been shot.

Totally crushed.

Absolutely destroyed.

He blinked about ten times, shocked at his body's reaction, the way it felt like he was coming apart at the seams. It was the sickening feeling of being rejected by your high-school crush, but a hundred times worse because it was so unexpected, so unwanted, so fucking uncharacteristic.

Now Ice began to pace the empty bedroom, the shellshocked sensation dissipating with every angry step. Soon his jaw was tight like wire, his eyes narrowed to focused slits, his fists clenched with determined fury.

But the anger wasn't directed at Indy.

It was directed at himself.

Because he understood now that the game wasn't being played against the woman behind that door.

It was being played against himself.

Hell, this woman had turned Ice against his own inner being.



Made him fight back his own natural need to dominate, to take control, to fucking *win*.

Yeah, she'd made Ice doubt his own instincts, second-guess his own motives, hold back what needed to come out.

Now Ice stopped his pacing and grinned like a madman. He stared blankly at the bathroom door, then rubbed his stubble and stormed out into the living room.

He went to the front door, peered through the spyglass like a manic obsessive, tested the deadbolt and the chain. The door itself was reinforced steel, fire-proof to make sure a room-fire didn't spread to the entire hotel. Nobody was coming through this door without explosives. And that would take time. It would take a team. It was very unlikely someone was going to storm into this hotel room tonight.

Still grinning like a damn maniac, Ice went to the window and double-checked the steel frame. The thick glass panels were bolted to the steel. No way to open them without smashing your way in—which wasn't happening because there was no balcony or ledge and they were too high up for anything but a chopper.

Which meant the next time anyone was going to disturb them would be when that hotel attendant returned with Indy's

clothes in a couple of hours.

Ice pulled the drapes closed and strode back to the center of the room. He was grinning so hard his face hurt. That reasoning part of him was still whispering a warning, but this time Ice wasn't having any of it.

“Think very carefully about what you're about to do, Ice,” he muttered, pulling his shirt off over his head, unbuckling his canvas utility belt, kicking off his military boots and hopping out of his combat pants. “This is a bad idea and you damn well know it, so just stop and get your head right.”

But although the words rolled off his tongue, they sounded distant and muffled through the hot blood pounding his eardrums. His body had taken over, and Ice was doing things his brain definitely did *not* want him to do.

Within seconds he was naked like a bear in the woods, all gleaming skin and rippling muscle. He thought a moment, then snatched up his combat pants and pulled out the Glock 9mm from the left cargo flap. Thought another moment and grabbed his sheathed blade from the side-table. Best to keep these handy just in case.

His gaze rested on his sunglasses, and he chuckled, tucked his knife under his armpit, picked up the shades and put them

on.

Then before his frantically protesting brain could shout another warning Ice stormed into the bedroom and without breaking stride slammed his heavy shoulder into the bathroom door.

The deadbolt ripped through the wood inside the frame, the door swung open with a violent *slam*, the momentum barreling Ice into the steamy bathroom like the invader he was, the animal he was, the man he was.

A man who'd found his woman.

A man who'd found his mission.

A man who hoped to hell he'd read this right.

It was right when she'd finished soaping her face that Indy heard the door smash open.

She screamed behind the shower curtain, desperately rubbing her eyes, backpedaling towards the back wall of the oversized shower stall, knowing she needed to get down before they started shooting.

Obviously it was another wet-team, and if they were breaking in here it meant Ice was already dead.

A splinter of sudden grief stabbed her heart, but her body was panicking too hard for it to linger. She blinked away the soap-burn from her eyes, slid down to the floor of the shower stall, stayed low as the shadowy figure that had blasted through the door lumbered towards the shower curtain.

Frantically Indy looked for a weapon. She cursed herself for not bringing a gun into the bathroom with her. Then she cursed Ice for being so overconfident in his own ability to protect her that he didn't remind her to take a weapon into the bathroom in case somebody overpowered his macho ass and got to her while she was naked and vulnerable.

There was nothing sharp or hard in the shower stall. Indy's heart sank so suddenly she almost blacked out. A rush of hopelessness hit her. A flash of despairing grief ripped through her again.

It said that if Ice was dead she was dead too.

Maybe it said that if Ice was dead, Indy *wanted* to be dead too.

Her eyes burned again as she blinked herself back from that sickening pit of despair. She was still alive. For some reason that dark figure hadn't started shooting or stabbing yet. Strange, because Indy could have sworn he'd entered with a knife in one hand and a gun in the other.

Puzzled, Indy squinted through the steam and suds, then frowned when the shadowy figure placed his weapons on the marble countertop near the sink, then slowly turned to face the shower curtain, putting his hands on his hips and standing there like a sentinel.

A naked sentinel, Indy realized as she got a brief glimpse of the man's silhouette in profile as he turned.

A profile which had an unmistakably erect appendage standing proudly upright, a weapon perhaps more deadly than

what this moronic asshole of an idiotic sonofabitch piece of shit lunatic madman had been wielding when he *broke* the fucking bathroom door and *stormed* into her private space like some insane stupid predatory narcissistic violently insane psycho killer.

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” Indy screeched through gritted teeth as she peeked out past the edge of the shower curtain and saw the surreally magnificent and terrifyingly beautiful sight of Ice standing there naked and erect in nothing but his damn sunglasses which were steamed over and dripping with beads of condensation. “Are you fucking *insane?*”

“Do you want me to leave?” came his cool response from behind those steamed-up sunglasses. “Maybe I read this wrong.”

“*Maybe* you read this wrong?” Indy sputtered out some soap-bubbles. “In what insane lunatic Madhatter world does *anyone* read *anything* like this from *anything* I said or did?!”

Ice shrugged those big bare shoulders, lazy grin hanging on his face. “*You know where to find me.* You said that.” He shrugged again. “That was a pretty clear invitation.”

Indy blinked away some shampoo from her lashes, wiped her nose, stared in wide-eyed disbelief, doing her best to keep her angry gaze on his face and not let her eyes get dragged down to that prominent erection which was shockingly thick and monstrously large and staring right up at her, its bulbous red head looking suspiciously like it was grinning just like its narcissistic maddening infuriating exhilarating beast of an owner.

“It was *not* an invitation,” she declared with as much firmness as she could find in her hot wet body with the steamy showerheads spitting and snarling like dragons behind her. “Mostly *definitely* not an invitation.”

Ice stroked his jaw thoughtfully, his big bare feet firmly planted on the marble floor, his big bare cock still grinning shamelessly at her.

“So you want me to leave?” Ice asked, crossing his arms over his chest now, making absolutely no move to turn away from her, certainly no move to leave the bathroom. That lazy grin still hung on his annoyingly handsome face, his steam shrouded body oozing coolness and control even though Indy was pretty sure Ice couldn’t see a darn thing through those misted-up sunglasses. “If you want me to leave, I’ll leave.”

“Leave.” Indy sputtered the word abruptly, all her willpower focused on pretending to stay angry and keeping her gaze fixed on his face, not his chillingly chiseled chest, not his ridiculously ridged abdomen, not his perfectly positioned pelvis, and certainly not that tantalizingly tempting tree-trunk of a cock. “Leave,” she managed to mumble out again, desperately trying to stay composed even as she felt herself unravelling from the inside out, sensed the wetness within her snaking its way out, felt the heat inside building hotter than the steam from those hissing showerheads. “I want you to leave. So please leave.”

Ice’s left eyebrow raised itself above the rim of his shades, then disappeared again behind the dark lens when he shrugged those big shoulders and shook that grinning head.

“No,” he said calmly, his arms resting in that crossed position, cock bobbing like it was taunting her, teasing her, tormenting her.

“No?” Indy gaped like a goldfish, not sure how to respond. “What do you mean, *no*?”

Ice shrugged again. “It’s obvious. The answer is no.”

“It wasn’t a damn question.” Indy’s grip on the shower curtain tightened involuntarily. The curtain moved on the rail,



revealing the edge of her steam-soaked breast and a whole lot of curvy hip. She hurriedly pulled the curtain back in place, but not before she saw Ice's throat move as he gulped, sensed his cock throb in a way that was not intentional, not voluntary, not under his control.

Just like there were things happening within Indy's body that were most certainly not under her control.

The wetness between her legs wasn't water. The stickiness coating her pussy wasn't shampoo. The rapid heartbeat wasn't fear. That desperate breathing wasn't from danger.

Not *that* kind of danger anyway.

A different kind of danger.

A deadlier kind of danger.

Something the CIA hadn't trained her to handle.

Something *life* hadn't trained her to handle.

"Why ... why are you still here?" Indy stammered, trying to be forceful, to state it like a demand not a request. "You asked me if I wanted you to leave. I said yes, I do want you to leave." She shrugged behind the shower curtain. "Not sure where the communication is breaking down. You *did* say that if I wanted you to leave, you'd leave."

Ice glanced off to the side like he was thinking. Then he looked back at her and nodded. “Correct. I did say that if you wanted me to leave, I would leave.”

Indy waited, her eyes widening with impatient expectation, then narrowing with frustrated annoyance. “So what am I missing? Leave. I want you to leave.”

Ice shook his head. “No, you don’t.”

Indy’s mouth hung open for an indignantly long moment. “So now you’re telling me what I mean by my own words? Are you seriously fucking telling me that *no* means *yes*? What cave did you just crawl out of? What medieval society are you still living in?”

Ice stroked his jaw and grinned out the side of his mouth. “You told me to leave, but that’s not what you really *want* me to do. And since I said I would leave if you *wanted* me to leave, logic dictates that if you do not really want me to leave, I do not in fact need to leave.” He shrugged those heavy shoulders for the umpteenth time, that lazy cocky grin still curling the edges of his stubble-framed mouth. “I mean, I *could* leave if I myself wanted to leave. But that’s my business. My choice to leave or not. My decision to stay or go.”

Indy stared, her body buzzing with a sickening thrill. Ice looked toweringly tall and brutally broad in the bathroom, but Indy didn't feel threatened in the least.

Because she remembered that first encounter with Ice at the safe-house when he'd pushed her against the wall and searched her body from behind.

Searched her with professional propriety and gentlemanly courtesy.

If he were the kind of man who took what he wanted without asking, without permission, without a clear invitation, she'd already know it, her body would already know it, already fear it, already hate it.

And although her body had reacted to the danger and chaos of the door being smashed in, right now there was no mistaking the energy coursing through her blood, rippling through her skin, curling through her curves.

"You know I won't touch you until you say so," came his whisper through the steam. "Not until you want me to touch you." He took a step towards the shower curtain. "Not until you ask me to touch you." Another step closer, close enough that Indy could see a bead of thick clear wetness on the shiny

tip of his cockhead. “Not until you fucking *beg* me to touch you.”

Indy gasped silently as her pussy clenched just enough to ooze out a hint of her own clear wetness. She gulped in a breath, blinked away some steam, tightened her grip on that shower curtain which hung like a veil between the two of them, a flimsy barrier that Indy somehow knew would be impenetrable until she said the word, until she gave him permission to breach that border, until she asked him to take another step.

Until she *begged* him to take another step.

And now she understood what Ice was doing.

He was still establishing dominance, setting the frame, playing the game.

A game he'd started back at the safe-house when he thought she was his to break.

A game that Ice wanted to finish.

Needed to finish.

Not just finish but *win*.

Now that sickening thrill raced through her body again.

Indy wondered if she'd been unconsciously playing that game

along with him.

Or maybe not that unconsciously.

After all, she'd dropped that sorta-kinda invitation out there.

She'd stripped off her clothes and placed them outside the bathroom door, like a test to see if Ice would give in and hand them over to the attendant, make a subtle compromise, just enough to let her know she had some power.

A gentle feminine power that rippled through her wet body like a drug as this deadly muscled man stood beyond that paper-thin veil which would not come down without her saying so.

*You know I won't touch you until you call, until you ask, until you fucking beg.*

But Indy wasn't ready to beg just yet even though her naughty little pussy seemed pretty darn ready.

“Actually, I *don't* know that you won't touch me uninvited,” she informed Ice. “Back at the safe-house you manhandled me like I was a doll. Tossed me against the wall. Dragged me by my hair. Then groped me up and down from behind.”

Ice snorted. “Oh, please. If that was groping, you’ve clearly never been groped.”

Indy tilted her head to the left and raised an eyebrow to the right. “Groping is in the eye of the gropee, not the groper. If I say it was groping, then it was groping.”

Ice shook his head firmly. “You know I had to search you for weapons. And you know I did it professional and clean.”

“If that was professional and clean, I shudder to imagine unprofessional and dirty.”

Ice chuckled unprofessionally. “You aren’t shuddering right now.”

“Because I’m not imagining it right now.”

Ice flashed a dirty grin. “I think you *are* imagining it.”

Heat tore through Indy’s body. Her cheeks burned when she remembered that she *had* in fact wondered what it might have felt like if Ice had searched her rough and dirty, taken his time with her, made sure he inspected every secret space, probed every private place.

“I am not,” she managed to say after forcing away those images of herself spread-eagled against the wall with Ice being

unprofessional and dirty behind her. “Not imagining anything of the sort.”

Ice stroked his jaw, grunted once, then shrugged again and cracked a very unprofessional and exceedingly dirty grin. “All you have to do is ask,” he whispered through that wicked grin. “Ask me to search you again. Just in case you’re hiding something I missed.”

He took a step closer and stopped. He was close enough that Indy could reach out and touch his chest, run her fingers down his abdomen, tighten her fist around his thick cock, cup her palm beneath his heavy balls.

Her pussy clenched again, along with her throat and her butt and every other clenchable thing in her body, inside and outside, within and without.

She blinked twice and glanced into his fogged-up shades. It struck her that even though this man was naked and exposed, erect in a way that couldn’t hide his arousal, he was still unreadable, still unpredictable.

Still unbeatable.

Because Indy knew Ice would not touch her until he got her to say it, got her to ask for it, got her to beg for it.

He was telling her loud and clear what he wanted, giving her a clear path to get what *she* wanted.

All she had to do was admit what she wanted.

Ask for what she wanted.

Beg for what she wanted.

This was real dominance, Indy realized as that ripple of heat expanded through her body like a wave emanating from her sexual core, her deepest being, her very essence. Yes, it was real dominance. He wasn't threatening her with his superior strength or his monstrous muscle, wasn't using fear as foreplay, wasn't using danger to stoke desire.

Not real fear or danger, at least.

But something very close to those dark triggers.

Something that scared her even as it made her feel safe.

Something that relaxed her even as it made her heart quicken.

Something that broke her even as it put her in control.

In control of what would happen next.

Now Indy's breath caught as Ice slowly pulled off his dark shades and let her see his eyes. She gasped at what burned



behind those emerald green orbs, gulped at the raw desire simmering like a flame about to ignite, gaped at the sight of the barely restrained beast that Ice was holding inside, waiting for her to say the word, make the choice, send this thing down a path that they both knew would make things very complicated.

Indy was almost hyperventilating now. The steam hung in the air like storm clouds. The showerheads thundered behind her like rain.

Her vision narrowed to where Indy could only see Ice's eyes, two dark green slits burning through her brain, the man barely holding the animal at bay, his willpower magnificently on display.

Indy opened her mouth to speak, but the words didn't come. She was all turned around and messed up and the steam was so thick and the water was so hot and he was so close she could almost touch him, almost taste him, almost take him, take him into her, deep into her, into that place that seemed to ache for him now, ask for him now, beg for him now.

Her mouth hung open but the words stalled in her throat, her breath stalled in her breast, her heart stalled in her chest.

There was some part of her that yearned to do what he wanted, say what he wanted, *be* what he wanted.

But there was another part of her that couldn't.

Wouldn't.

Didn't.

Indy wasn't sure which part was which. All she knew was that she wanted to submit but didn't want to give in, wanted to be taken but didn't want to admit it, wanted to be owned but was too afraid to say it, to own it, to *be* it.

Then she saw something in Ice's eyes.

A flash of darkness.

A glint of danger.

And then a glimmer of recognition.

Like maybe he saw it in her, saw both the yes and the no, the willingness and the hesitation, the desire and the doubt.

Like maybe he understood that she wasn't all the way there yet, wasn't all the way home yet, wasn't all the way his yet.

Like maybe he understood that he'd have to lead her past that final threshold, carry her to that dark destination, make

her all the way his, take her all the way home.

“I’m very close to the line here,” came Ice’s hot whisper through the storm-clouds and the thunder-rain. “Maybe I’ve even crossed it. I’m so fucking turned around, so damn messed up, so far out of my mind I can’t even read my own thoughts.” He swallowed thickly, took a half-step closer, his fists clenched by his sides now, that cool half-grin replaced by a tight-lipped expression of trembling restraint, a man barely holding on to his sanity, barely holding off the animal, barely holding back the jungle. “But at the same time I’m so deep inside my body that there’s no doubt, Indy. No doubt that there’s no line at all between us, that we’ve crossed something together, crossed everything together, crossed it forever.” He took a slow breath, exhaled heavily, gazed deep and long into her eyes. “Hell, I can’t believe I’m admitting this out loud, but if fate is real then this is what it looks like, if destiny is real then this is what it feels like.” He blinked twice, something resembling panic flashing in his burning eyes. “And if love is real, then maybe this is how it happens.”

Indy almost swooned in the steam, almost melted in the mist, almost collapsed in the clouds. She wasn’t sure what

she'd heard, wasn't certain what he'd said, had no idea what he meant.

But she knew for damn sure what she felt.

Saw loud and clear what *he* felt.

And how hard it had been for Ice to express it.

A part of her longed to respond, to say those three words that she heard echo in her head, felt thrum in her heart, saw scrawled on the steamed-up mirror behind his back, heard gurgling up from the drain beneath her toes.

“This is how it happens ...” she repeated dumbly. “Is ... that what's happening, Ice? Is that what I'm feeling? Is that what I'm thinking?”

A half-smile cracked the corners of Ice's mouth. A half-shrug followed. “Well, I wouldn't presume to tell you what you're thinking.”

Indy flashed a little smile. “Really? You were just fine with presuming exactly that when you busted in here with all your weapons drawn.”

That half-smile stayed on his face. “Did I read it wrong?” he whispered wickedly.

Indy shook her head gently, the blush burning behind her cheeks. “No,” she whispered, blinking away some wetness that wasn’t from the shower. “You didn’t read it wrong, Ice. You read it right. You read *me* right.” She blinked again, cast a quick glance down at his brandished weapon bobbing between them, then looked back up into his shining eyes, a hint of playful defiance flashing in hers. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to be begging anytime soon. It’s not that easy.”

“Sure it is.” Ice grinned. “You just go down on your knees and say *please*.”

Indy choked out a laugh. “OK, maybe you did read it wrong after all. No way am I doing any of that.”

Ice’s grin didn’t waver. In fact it seemed to get bigger, with a hint of triumph tickling the corners. “Any of what, exactly?”

Indy gulped as Ice’s cock bobbed between them. This time she could tell Ice had intentionally flexed. She took a breath, exhaled as the embarrassment burned down her neck. “Any of ... *that*,” she said, shooting a furtive glance downwards and then hurriedly looking up again. “I mean ... you know what I mean.”

Ice sighed loudly, shrugged heavily, then placed his hands on his hips, glanced shamelessly down at his cock for a long

moment before looking up again. “I *do* know what you mean,” he said with wide-eyed earnestness. Then he suddenly narrowed those eyes to wicked slits, tightened his lips to a devious smile. “I also know you’re lying.”

“You do not. I am not.”

He chuckled carelessly, hands still on his hips. “It’s my job to know when someone’s lying, remember?”

“A job that I pointed out you were not very good at,” Indy retorted. “After all, you should have known within two minutes of meeting me that I was innocent and telling the truth. Instead you manhandled me like a big bully.”

Ice feigned a frown. “Well, if I’m bad at my job, then perhaps you’ve been lying about everything. Maybe you are a dirty crooked traitor after all.” He cocked his left eyebrow, pointedly dragged his gaze down along the dark silhouette of her body behind the curtain. “Maybe you need to be restrained again. Maybe you need to be searched again. Who knows what you’ve got hidden on you. Hidden *in* you.”

Indy felt that thrill surge once more. She tugged at the shower curtain that she’d still somehow managed to keep in place as a veil between them. It was wet as sin, pressed tight against her body, showing off her outline very clearly. Perhaps

that explained why Ice had managed to stay impressively erect all this while.

Or maybe it was something else about their back-and-forth that was keeping him erect, keeping him aroused, keeping him interested.

She hadn't submitted yet.

Hadn't asked yet.

Sure as hell hadn't begged yet.

Not even after Ice himself had revealed a crack in his armor, had said things that Indy sensed he wouldn't be caught dead saying in the "real" world, the world outside this steamy secluded room.

"Oh, hey, does your brother Jack know you've started believing in things like fate, like destiny, like—" Indy started off teasing, but she couldn't say that third word without it catching in her throat with a seriousness that threatened to bring her to her knees. She blinked and tried to finish the sentence, but Ice's expression made it damn clear that he didn't like this part of the game.

"Careful," he growled. "Now you're the one dangerously close to crossing the line." He took a breath, shrugged it out

carelessly. “Besides, I was just bullshitting with all that stuff about fate and destiny and love. Jack swears that the women eat that woo-woo stuff up. He uses it all the time. Thought I’d give it a try.” Now that half-grin was back. “Clearly it worked.”

Indy scoffed out a breath. “Oh, please. It did not work.” She blinked and swallowed. Ice was teasing, wasn’t he? Yes. Of course he was teasing. He’d meant all of that stuff earlier. She’d heard it in his voice. Hadn’t she? “It did not work at all,” she forced herself to tease back even though a sliver of doubt had worked itself into her heart.

“Didn’t it?” Ice took another step closer. Now he was so close that his erection grazed the sheer curtain that was wet against the swell of Indy’s hip. She gasped silently as the beautiful upwards curve of his cock tightened at the contact.

“No,” Indy whispered, trying desperately to keep playing this game even though she was done with it now, her body screaming yes even as she somehow kept forcing out the word no. “Didn’t work. Isn’t working. Would never work on me.”

“So I read it wrong?” Ice murmured, shifting on his feet, his cockhead dragging along the curtain, sending a ripple of arousal through her flesh.



Indy managed a nod. Her eyes were glazing over as his heavy cockhead pressed the wet shower curtain against the front of her left thigh.

Ice leaned in an inch, lowered his voice an octave, narrowed his eyes a touch. “Could have sworn you confirmed that I’d read it right. Pretty damn sure you murmured something like *Oh, you read it right, Ice. Oh, you read ME right, Ice. Oh, Ice, take me. Take me now, Ice. I’m begging you, Ice. Please take me.*”

Indy gasped out a laugh. “OK, for a professional interrogator, you suck at remembering your victims’ confessions.”

“They’re called *targets*, not *victims*.”

“When they’re manhandled and held down and used like objects they’re most certainly called *victims*.”

Ice raised an eyebrow, his gaze moving slowly and hungrily along her exposed shoulder. Indy tugged pathetically at the shower curtain to cover a bit more of herself, but her resistance was fading, her frame was breaking, her need was calling.

“So I’m victimizing you?” Ice whispered, his breath hot against her cheek, his erection hanging over the threshold between the shower stall and the rest of the bathroom, the rest of the world, the rest of the universe. “I seem to remember saving your ass from two thugs with your name on their hit-list.”

Indy smiled with exaggerated sweetness. “Well, thank you. But I’m pretty sure you were also saving your own ass. They would have killed you first.”

“Not if I gave you up. I could have pretended to be Moses and just left the safe-house, washed my hands of the whole thing. I’d expect a bit more gratitude.”

“All right fine. I’ve already thanked you twice. Do you want me to get on my knees and bow my head in eternal gratitude to the great warrior-king who saved my delicate ass?”

Ice grinned. “That would be great. Can we do that now? And I like the warrior-king title. You can call me that from now on.”

Indy rolled her eyes. “It’s actually less lame than calling you *Sir*.”

Ice raised his left eyebrow. “You seem to have a problem with authority.”

“So do you,” Indy retorted. “Except your problem is that you expect everyone to blindly submit to *your* authority.”

Ice shrugged. “That’s the definition of authority. Something to which others submit.”

Indy shrugged back. “Well, in that case you don’t have any authority right now, because I don’t see anyone submitting.”

“I do.” Ice’s eyes flashed wickedly. “Just look in the mirror in about three seconds and you’ll see her. Though I guess it’ll be hard to do that when you’re on your knees submitting to your warrior-king.”

Indy rolled her eyes again, but it was damn hard to keep the smile zipped behind her twitching lips. “That’s like the twentieth time you’ve asked me to go down on my knees. Wonder when you’ll figure out that it’s not going to happen.”

Ice grunted dismissively. “It was a metaphor. You don’t have to get on your knees to beg. You can do it standing up. Go on. I’m listening.”

“Good. Then you can hear my answer. It’s *no*. Now get out of the bathroom so I can finish my shower before I turn into a

puckered lobster.”

“I like the word *pucker*,” Ice whispered devilishly, making no attempt to leave the bathroom, showing no sign that he’d heard the word *no*. “As in I’d like to inspect your pucker, Ma’am.”

Indy gasped in mortified shock, stumbling back as she was hit once again by the sickeningly filthy image of herself spread-eagled against the wall, legs wide apart, with Ice searching her from behind like the dirty Delta he clearly was inside.

But those two stumbling steps backward put Indy directly into the path of those snarling spitting showerheads, and the blast from the hot-water cannons surprised her enough that she lost her grip on the shower curtain.

The curtain fell away from her wet body, and as she gasped in the steam, sputtered in the stream, her eyelids fluttered open just enough to see the look on Ice’s face.

And she knew there was no turning back now.

“Turn around,” came the growl from somewhere deep in Ice’s thick throat. His eyes were dangerous slits of molten emerald, fists clenched and big like cinderblocks, cock at full

mast, curving proudly upwards, a thick stream of pre-cum hanging down from its swollen tip. “Hands flat against the wall. Do it now.”

Indy froze in the scalding jets, her breath sucking in the hot steam, her skin burning with heat from both outside and inside. She gulped twice and blinked, instinctively knowing that this was the moment of truth, the end of the game. They had blazed past the flirty-playful part of this dance.

Now it was time to put up or shut up.

Ice’s restraint was stretched thin.

That animal inside was close to bursting out.

Indy couldn’t mess with him any longer.

Couldn’t tease him.

Couldn’t taunt him.

Couldn’t tame him.

She only had two choices here, and they were both serious as sin, decisive as death, final as fuck:

Turn him away for good.

Or turn around and do what he says.

Now the shower walls seemed to fall away, leaving nothing but the storming clouds and the thundering rain, nothing but a man and woman, nothing but his command and her response.

And so Indy responded.

She responded not from the victim in her.

Not from the target in her.

But from the woman in her.

And that woman turned and faced the wall.

Raised her bare arms in the smoky white steam.

Placed her palms flat against the glistening black marble.

Bowed her head in submission.

Even as something dark and dirty inside her whispered that she'd won.

Ice wasn't sure if he'd won or lost. Wasn't even sure if he was still playing the damn game.

Because when that curtain fell away to reveal Indy's naked curves glistening wet in the hot jets, shining dark in the thick steam, her tight little nipples puckered and pebbled at the center of petite round breasts, the raven-black curls masking her sex shining like diamonds in the night, Ice knew he was done for, totally destroyed, at the mercy of whatever this woman had awakened inside him, aroused in the depths of his being, brought forth from his very essence as a man.

Her man.

"Oh, hell, Indy," he muttered as he stared through the steam, watched her turn away from him, raise her arms and place her palms flat against the weeping walls, her curves obscured in erotic mystery by the storm-clouds of their private chamber.

A chamber into which Ice now stepped.

His bare feet crossed the threshold of the shower stall, and the clouds enveloped him, the steam boiling the air around

them, his heat roiling the blood within him.

Indy's head was slightly lowered, her fingers splayed wide, palms tight against the wall like there was a tension inside her that needed to be released, like she wanted to claw at those walls, burrow through the brick, tear through the tiles.

“Easy,” he whispered as he leaned in close, stroked her slicked-down hair from behind, kissed the steam-soaked arch of her neck, ran the back of his rough hand down between her shoulder blades, tracing his finger along her trembling spine. “Relax. You're safe with me. You'll always be safe with me.”

Indy let out a moaning exhale as Ice's thick fingertip traced its way down the center of her lower back, stopping just above the beginning of her gorgeous ass. He kept his fingertip pressed there, leaned in close to her neck again, a grizzly grin breaking on his stubbly face.

“Of course, I need to make sure that I'm safe too,” Ice growled against the side of her neck, his tongue snaking out to taste her, to try her, to mark her. “And so I'm going to have to search you again. For my own protection, you understand?”

Indy gasped as Ice licked her neck again, then dragged that solitary finger delicately down the outside edges of her tightly closed rear crack, tracing little circles around the smooth skin



of her buttocks, making her shudder and shiver, groan and grumble, moan and mumble.

“Did you say something?” Ice whispered against her neck as that finger found the bottom edge of her rear parting, snaked its way beneath her fork, eased its way across her slit, curled its way towards her clit. “Is that you begging?”

Indy mumbled out something that was lost in the thunder of the shower-cannons, didn't make it through the roar of blood in Ice's head. She turned her head sideways, and Ice groaned when he saw how tightly shut Indy's eyelids were, her pretty face twisted in a grimace of shuddering ecstasy, her dark red lips muttering out incomprehensible sounds as they trembled from his touch, quivered from his caress, pulsed from his perusal.

“Just say *please*,” Ice whispered as his fingertip traced the slick surface of Indy's nether lips. He yearned to push his thick finger into her from beneath and behind, was almost out of his damn mind at the way her vagina clenched tight and then relaxed as he petted her. He wasn't sure how long he could maintain this cool frame, wasn't certain how long he could pretend like he was in control of anything at all right now.

“Say the word and I’ll take care of you, Indy. Take care of that need. All you have to do is ask. All you have to do is beg.”

Now Indy managed to shake her head, her eyelids still shut tight, lips clamped shut but still trembling. Her fingertips clawed at the walls, her legs parting subtly as Ice teased her slit, moved dangerously close to her clit.

But she didn’t say the word, didn’t ask the question, didn’t beg for the release.

Ice gulped back the desperate urge to drop to his knees and push his face up where his finger was right now. But somehow he held himself back, using most of his remaining willpower to not give in to that burning need to taste her from below, to replace that lucky finger with his thirsty tongue, to lose himself in her and admit that he’d lost whatever semblance of control he’d started with, would end up on his knees before he ever got Indy to go down on hers.

Ice tried to get his finger out of there, away from that warm secret space between her parted legs. But it was impossible, and now Ice sensed his cock throbbing behind her ass, yearning to follow the path his finger had traced to her pussy from below. Ice was at the edge of his willpower, on the brink of spanking that ass and pressing down on that lower

back and driving into her slit from behind, taking his release before he got her to beg for hers.

But still Ice held on, reveling in the way this woman was ripping him to shreds because she herself was torn between desire and doubt, between resisting and relinquishing, snarling and spitting before sighing and submitting.

She was perfect.

Fucking perfect.

Like she'd been made for him.

Suddenly Ice was overcome by a rush of yearning, a desperate sort of need that wasn't physical or even emotional but some potent combination of the mind and the body, the spirit and the animal, the past and the future.

That rush pulled him back to that moment when those uncharacteristic words *fate* and *destiny* had gushed past his lips, words that awakened conflicting emotions in Ice because they'd been used by his parents to justify their own bad choices. He swallowed hard, his jaw tightening, his throat constricting as that sense of yearning ripped through him again, a desperate need to hold this woman close, like she was the answer to questions he didn't know how to ask, didn't

know if he wanted to ask, didn't know if he fucking *dared* to ask.

“Ask me again,” came Indy's voice through the raging madness in Ice's head. “Ask me again, Ice.”

Ice blinked himself back from where he'd disappeared, realized he was embracing Indy from behind, his face buried in the crook of her neck, one arm wrapped tight around her mid-section beneath her breasts, the other hand lower against her front, palm flat against her abdomen, fingertips buried in the wet curls marking the top edge of her triangle.

“Ask you what?” Ice muttered, a vague memory of himself saying something flickering through his consciousness. He tried to remember what he'd just said but couldn't. “Ask you what again?”

“What you asked me just now, two seconds ago, don't you remember?” Indy turned her head halfway, her eyelids fluttering open now, her gaze filled with something that felt startlingly close to that potent mix of the physical and the emotional, the animal and the spirit, the thought and the word, the question and the answer. She stared expectantly, then suddenly blinked twice, a flash of disappointment streaking across her face before she forced a little smile. “OK, never

mind. You don't remember what you just asked me. Maybe I didn't hear you right."

"Wait, what did I just ask you?" Ice gulped back another fleeting memory of having mumbled something as that incomprehensible yearning ripped through him moments ago, transporting him somewhere else, like he'd lost time, had been lost in space.

Indy blinked twice more, glancing strangely into his eyes before looking away. "No, never mind. I probably didn't hear you right."

Ice felt her pulling away from him. Not her body but the rest of her.

"What did you hear?" he forced himself to ask even as the memory of his mumblings flickered through like splintered light through slatted shades. "Tell me."

Indy swallowed silently, then glanced at him sideways again, barely able to hold his gaze. "You asked if I loved you."

Ice almost blacked out as the memory came back just as her words came through. He stayed silent, embracing Indy from behind, his body pressed against hers like a blanket, a shield, a second skin, like he wanted to merge with her, join

with her, become part of her, consume her so she would become part of him, fill in what was missing, that exposed part of his soul where she'd broken through his armor.

Ice couldn't understand it, couldn't explain this need that Indy had exposed in him, a need that scared him, made him vulnerable in a way that he didn't think he could ever be.

“Yeah, you didn't hear me right,” he said gruffly against her neck. He swallowed thickly when he felt her flinch against him. Then he spoke, the words coming quick, from that place where they bypassed the censor in his mind. “I don't need to ask you that. I already know the answer.”

Indy's body stiffened under his embrace, then relaxed suddenly, almost like she'd given up, was collapsing. She turned her head away from him, shaking it slowly and looking down at the floor. “You're exhausting,” she said, still not looking at him. “One moment I think I know you, think I understand you, think I understand *myself* around you. And then you say things and I can't tell if you're messing with me or not, if you're still playing that game of manipulation and dominance that I know is part of you, maybe even *all* of you.” She paused a beat. “But then I remember we've only known each other a day. A hell of a day, sure. And I know the

psychology, how extreme experiences bond people together in very short periods of time. I feel it too, Ice. And shit, it feels *so* real. But it's still been just a day. Which means that maybe we're *both* reading this wrong, Ice. There's no way this can mean what it feels like it means." She sighed and shook her head again. "I don't even know what I'm saying. And apparently I don't even know what *you're* saying, since you claim you never said it." Indy took her palms off the wall, tried to get out from his embrace, but Ice wouldn't let her. "Let me go."

Ice shook his head, tightening his embrace and pressing her gently but firmly against the warm black marble. "Not until you answer my question," he whispered, feeling that vulnerable part of him opening wider, exposing more of that yearning need that he didn't even know existed in his battle-hardened heart, in his steel-reinforced psyche. All he knew was that he needed to hold on to her, that he couldn't let her go, couldn't release her until they'd sorted this out. Something told him they were at a crossroads, a turning point, that if he broke from this embrace and let her walk out of this room they'd never be able to find their way back to this place in the clouds, this space in the steam, this surreal corner of the universe where time seemed to stand still and space seemed to

swirl around them like floodwaters eddying around a rock.

“Answer the question, Indy,” he said again, the voice rumbling from deep in his throat, his fingertips creeping downwards past the upper edge of her dark delta as Indy’s ass squirmed against his cock in a useless attempt to break away from him.

“You said I didn’t hear you right,” she said, her cheek flat against the wet marble wall now, Ice pressing against her from behind, holding her in place like he’d done back at the safe-house, like they were replaying the scene in a different setting, like perhaps they’d replayed this scene in a thousand settings over a thousand lifetimes, the power of all those lifetimes converging in the eternal now, the singular moment, the infinite present.

“And you said *ask me again*,” Ice murmured, smothering her body from behind, sliding one hand up along her midsection to her breast, snaking the other hand down along her curl-covered mound until he teased the top corner of her slit, making her tremble and tighten as he pressed her against the hot wet wall. “So I ask you again. Do you love me?”

“This is a very strange interrogation,” she whispered weakly against the wall as the water hammered down on Ice’s back, the steam hissed around their soaked bodies. “It’s been a



very strange day. And that is a very strange question. Why ... why would you ask me that? How could you possibly expect me to say yes?"

Ice didn't flinch. He was regaining his frame, finding his way back to the path he instinctively knew they needed to head down, a path that felt like it had to be walked before they could face whatever was coming next in this strange mission, this mission that seemed manufactured by that strange wolf-eyed man even though obviously it couldn't have been, not with Kaiser and Moses and CIA wet-teams and mysterious manipulators in the shadows of Langley.

And so Ice kept going down this path. He moved his hand through the shadowy wet curls between her legs, making her gasp. "So the answer is no?" he whispered. "You can say no if the answer is no. But you can't lie. Remember who you're dealing with."

Indy raised an eyebrow, then rolled her eyes up towards the marble wall that she was smushed against. "How could I forget who I'm dealing with when I'm being squished against a wall by a big bully who gets grumpy when he has to ask the same question twice."

“I’ve already asked this question twice, which means this is the third time,” Ice pointed out. “And I warned you once and am warning you again: You do *not* want to see me grumpy.”

Indy giggled sideways at him. “Haven’t I already seen you grumpy? Back when you were tied to the bathroom fixtures and captured on video for Jack’s viewing pleasure?”

“Way to kill the mood by bringing up that grinning jackass,” Ice grumbled.

“Way to kid yourself into thinking there’s a *mood* here.”

Ice grinned. “Damn right there’s a mood. And you seem to be very much in it.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Indy murmured. “I should remind you I’ve asked to be released about ten times now.”

“You want your release? Finally we’re getting somewhere!” Ice’s finger and thumb closed around her nipple, pinching and twisting just as he pressed her clit with his fingertip. Indy reacted like she’d been electrocuted, her body twitching against his, her tongue snaking out past her lips, her eyes rolling up in her head as Ice kept the pressure on, twisting her nipple and grinding her clit, his cock pressed lengthwise

and upright against her writhing ass. Then suddenly Ice stopped everything, froze his fingers mid-pinch on her hard nipple, pulled the pressure off her stiff clit. “But asking for your release is only the first step. You need to beg if you want me to finish the job.”

“You asshole,” Indy groaned against the wall. “I thought the United States doesn’t allow torture. I have rights, you know.”

“The only rights you have are what you negotiate,” Ice growled against her ear. “And your only negotiating tactic is to beg.”

Indy shook her head, her cheek moving against Ice’s lips. Then she moved her ass, pushing backwards against his swollen cock, making him almost choke on his damn tongue as he throbbed against her flesh.

“I think you’re pretty damn close to your own release,” she murmured as Ice’s vision got blurry from the way her ass was moving against his erection. “And once I get your weapon to discharge, you’re going to be defenseless, out of ammo, emptied out. Though judging from all that sticky white stuff on your tough-guy combat pants, you might already be emptied out.”

Now Ice slammed his hips forward against her ass, pressing her so hard against the wall she couldn't squirm, couldn't grind, couldn't use her cushioned arsenal against his loaded gun.

“Did you just question my manhood?” he growled into her hair from behind. “You sure you want to go down this path?”

“I'm not sure of anything right now,” Indy confessed as she tried to move but couldn't. “Just that we're probably emptying out all the Mumbai reservoirs by letting three showerheads blast away to glory while you interrogate and torture me.”

Ice thought a moment, then grunted. “Don't move.” He pressed his palm flat against her upper back, then reached out and turned off the shower, killing all three showerheads at once.

The roar of the jets still echoed through the steam long enough for the silence to slip in behind.

And through the silence came a sickeningly unwelcome sound from outside the bathroom door.

Ice's phone.

“Fuck,” he muttered, closing his eyes tight and shaking his head. He considered ignoring the call. Maybe it was Jack calling back to give him more shit. He waited for three long rings, then felt Indy turn her head towards him, her shoulders slumping in a sigh that Ice himself felt go through his tensed-up body. “If that’s Jack, I swear I will break his fucking neck.”

The rings kept coming, and Ice knew he had to take the call. Jack was on his way to Baltimore with Keller on serious Darkwater business, and so it wouldn’t be him. Which meant it was Benson calling with an update—or maybe the bastard just wanted to know why Ice wasn’t within snooping range of his phone’s camera and microphone. Either way, Ice couldn’t ignore the call.

So Ice huffed out a breath and stepped away from Indy. She sighed against the wall, then slowly turned towards him. A quick glance into his eyes, then she blinked and looked away, her cheeks darkening with color. Turning off the shower seemed to have flipped some kind of switch in her, maybe in both of them. Hell, even the steam was gone, sucked up by the powerful vents. Cool air was circulating through the wet bathroom, and Indy’s shoulders hunched forward as a shiver went through her puckered-up body.

The moment was over, the mood was dead, and Ice felt a chill go through him as he pulled open the bathroom door, stormed over to the living room, snatched up a handful of towels from the stack on the sofa. He glanced at his angrily vibrating phone, saw that it was Benson's number, noticed that the camera was flashing like a demon's eyeball.

Ice shook his head, held up a middle finger to the camera, which would have already transmitted a full frontal shot of Ice in all his glory. He followed up the finger-flip with a towel-toss to cover the camera, then turned to see Indy wet and shivering standing in the doorway, waiting for a towel.

"Guess it wasn't meant to be," she said awkwardly as Ice underhanded a rolled-up towel in her direction. She caught the towel and wrapped it around her, then flashed a little smile that hinted at disappointment.

But there was something else in that tense little smile, and as Ice watched Indy turn away and close the bathroom door, a sinking dread stabbed at his heart.

He felt it too, that other unnamable, unspeakable, unfathomable emotion lurking behind the disappointment.

A sense that perhaps they'd never get this chance again, never get this choice again, never get this moment again.

“It’ll take a moment to run the search, Rhett. Do you want some coffee in the meantime?”

Rhett Rodgers shook his head, then leaned back on the atrociously pink cloth-covered sofa and crossed one leg over the other knee. He carefully plucked a long blond hair off his tailored charcoal trousers, frowning as he went over what he knew needed to happen at the end of this little tryst at Blondie’s studio apartment in Georgetown.

He glanced at the back of Blondie’s head as she hunched over a black unmarked laptop. Rhett couldn’t see her face, but he knew she’d be scrunching up her nose in that almost-cute way, squinting those whip-smart blue eyes at the lines of computer code streaming across the screen, her long slender fingers flying over the keyboard like a concert pianist giving a virtuoso performance.

Rhett hadn’t been planning to use the twenty-six-year-old CIA tech analyst this way. But it was always an option, which was why he called her Blondie instead of her real name. Rhett had learned early that tying up loose ends was easier when you didn’t see the people you discarded as real humans.

They'd met two years ago at the coffee-machine in Langley's windowless technology bunker. Rhett had been down there supervising an unsanctioned drone-strike on a Russian oligarch's yacht off the coast of Santorini, Greece. He'd chatted her up when he was all jacked up after watching on the big screen as the attack-drone sank the hundred-foot boat with everyone on board—including a full crew and about a dozen members of the Russian's family, women and children included.

Collateral damage, Rhett reminded himself as Blondie swiveled around on her chair, beaming proudly at him as the computer beeped behind her.

“NSA database turned up a match with the CCTV footage from the Mumbai airport. Got the guy's passport—an alias—from the Indian immigration database. Then I ran a search for the alias against all local hotels. They're at the Raj Palace Hotel in Mumbai. Oh, and I also got his real name from the Department of Defense database,” Blondie announced happily, smiling wide then curling a loose strand of hair around her left ear. Her blue blouse was still unbuttoned, her white bra still pushed up over her tiny breasts that got Rhett surprisingly hard even though he preferred tits that could fill his hands.



Shit, he would miss Blondie.

They had a nice thing going.

Collateral damage was a bitch sometimes.

Rhett grunted an acknowledgment, making sure he didn't return the smile. It was important to keep a woman off-balance and insecure. That way even the slightest affection would melt her like butter, make her willing to do anything for you. He stayed silent and cold, his mind spinning ahead to how he was going to clean up after disposing of Blondie.

Blondie lost the smile, self-consciousness streaking her heavily made-up face. She'd never worn makeup until Rhett had suggested she'd look better if she covered up those acne-scars from college, where she'd been a star hacker at MIT.

"What's next?" she said hopefully, nervous excitement making her clutch the foam armrests of her swivel chair. "Another wet-team? I can use a different subcontractor. It won't be traced back to us."

There is no *us*, you dumb bitch, Rhett thought with a shiver of contempt. He glanced past her at the computer screen, then graced her with the hint of a smile. She was excited like a puppy, thrilled that the great Rhett Rodgers had

taken her into his confidence, was going to take her along as he rose to the top of the CIA dogpile.

Rhett stroked his jaw, shot a quick glance at her exposed nipples, cursed himself for leaving that bite-mark when he'd bounced her on his cock and come hard into her, his orgasm enhanced by the knowledge that it would be the last time for Blondie, that she'd die with his semen in her cunt.

He wasn't bothered about anyone finding a match for his DNA because he wasn't in any system anywhere in the world. The identities of CIA Non-Official Cover—NOC—Operatives were extraordinarily well-protected. And Rhett also had the advantage of being somewhat of an old-timer, his tenure with the Agency beginning back when things weren't so computerized, when it was easy as pie to wipe out all traces of a man's former identity, erase his real name from history, make him disappear and reappear as someone else, transform and transmute, become the man he truly was inside.

Benson was right about that part, Rhett thought as a hint of anxiety slithered through him at the memory of that wily bastard's unannounced visit that morning at Langley. Yeah, Benson was right—thirty years of manipulation and murder

for the CIA only made Rhett more of the man he already was inside.

He glanced sharply at Blondie, his gaze running past that red bite-mark on her nipple. There were no dental records for Rhett Rodgers either. Not that anyone was going to find Blondie's body before the Chesapeake Bay crabs got to her. Those insects of the ocean would pick her clean, starting with the eyeballs so they could get to her admittedly brilliant brain.

Brilliant but still so dumb, Rhett thought as Blondie sat there waiting for his orders, his commands, his demands. He considered asking her to get on her knees and suck him off, but there wasn't enough time. O'Donnell and her Darkwater protector wouldn't stay long in one place, not with Benson pulling the strings. If Rhett wanted another crack at O'Donnell, he had maybe a couple of hours to get another wet-team to the hotel.

“What does DOD have on the Darkwater guy?” he said after thinking through it quickly.

“Michael Wagner. Nickname Ice. Former Delta. Military Police before that. West Point instructor before he and his brother Jack quit together, presumably to join Darkwater.” Blondie didn't need to glance at her computer screen again.

She had a photographic memory. “We need to move fast to mobilize a new wet-team. It’ll take a couple of hours, especially if we need to do it without leaving a trace in the system.”

Rhett exhaled, shook his head. “No more subcontracted wet teams. Clearly O’Donnell and Wagner made it past the last one at the safe-house, and this time they’ll be watching for it. It would be a mess at a hotel like the Raj Palace.”

“Thought we wanted it to get messy.”

Rhett bristled at the word *we* even though he’d played it that way. When working Blondie he’d chosen to use a psychological manipulation tactic he liked to call *radical honesty*, where he told his target the absolute truth, thereby pulling her completely under his influence because she believed he trusted her.

Believed he loved her.

“There is such a thing as *too* messy.” Rhett stretched his arms out over the sofa’s backrest and exhaled. “The point of sending the wet-team to the safe-house was to make it so that Kaiser couldn’t put O’Donnell down quietly. I wanted enough of a mess for Senator Robinson to plausibly believe Kaiser called in the hit on his own analyst to cover up the

embarrassing fact that he's got a traitor in the ranks. In fact I'd hoped Kaiser would do exactly that himself—send in a wet-team and take O'Donnell out. Hell, that's what I'd have done as CIA Director. But instead he sent in Benson and Darkwater, which complicates things. Benson's probably convinced Kaiser that O'Donnell is being set up as a patsy, so now this Darkwater guy Ice Wagner is protecting her." He shook his head again, this time with more vigor. "Which means we need to change tactics. We've already planted electronic evidence that O'Donnell passed on classified information. Now all we have to do is make it look like Kaiser sent Benson's guy in to clean up the O'Donnell thing."

Blondie cocked her head and frowned. "You mean make it look like Wagner killed her?" She blinked rapidly, those blue eyes dancing in her head, her fingertips tapping on the armrests. "So we need a wet-team that takes them both captive? Then ... then they kill O'Donnell with Ice Wagner's weapon? Something like that?"

Rhett arched his head back, looked at the ceiling, wondered if he should break Blondie's neck now and get it over with. She was outliving her usefulness, and with Benson already sniffing around, Rhett didn't want any loose ends.

Three long breaths and Rhett stepped back from the edge. He still needed her for one last task. Which meant he still had to play his game of radical honesty.

“We aren’t going to find a subcontracted wet-team on short notice capable of capturing a former Delta guy without creating a holy mess. And that would make it obvious to Senator Robinson that O’Donnell is being set up. Because why the hell would Kaiser send Benson in and then *also* send in a wet team—not once but twice? Robinson wouldn’t believe that.”

“He might.” Blondie shrugged. “Maybe we convince Robinson that Benson is working alone, going behind Kaiser’s back to protect O’Donnell. After all, Benson recruited O’Donnell. Maybe he’s protecting his own reputation. Maybe he believes she’s innocent—which she is, by the way.”

Rhett rubbed his eyes and swallowed a sudden burst of rage. Another deep breath and a long exhale and he managed to smile and shake his head. “Nobody’s innocent in our world.” He sighed, nodded a quick acknowledgement. “Still, that’s not a bad idea, and it might have worked if that first wet team got in there and killed Ice Wagner along with O’Donnell. It would have created enough of a mess for Senator Robinson

to get wind of it, enough of a cluster-fuck that I could get Robinson to believe Benson was going behind Kaiser's back, that Kaiser was losing his edge, losing control of his own organization, needed to be put out to pasture." Rhett stood from the sofa now, strolled over to Blondie, stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, making her gasp and gape up at him like the eager-to-please puppy she was. "But although Robinson is distancing himself from Benson and Darkwater, is being noncommittal about his support for Kaiser, he still trusts those two old dogs."

"But he trusts you too, doesn't he?"

Rhett winked down at her, patting her cheek, then running his fingertip across her lips before stepping away and strolling to the window. He glanced down at the rear parking lot of the apartment building. There were three cars in the fifteen-spot lot. When he arrived there'd been a fourth—a battered white maintenance van on its way out, bearded Hispanic maintenance guy behind the wheel. All the remaining vehicles were Japanese-made sedans. The black BMW 7-Series that he used for everyday business wasn't here. He'd driven it home to Rockville, taken a taxi to Dupont Circle, then walked to Blondie's apartment in Georgetown. He knew she'd be home.

She worked nights at the Langley tech bunker, which was busy round the clock, every day of the year, every year until the end of time. Rhett wasn't worried about anyone tracking him via his CIA cell phone. Nobody at the upper levels of Langley could be tracked unless they specifically enabled it on their CIA devices. Too much of a security risk to have that kind of data available for hackers. Not even the NSA could track him without explicit authorization from the President—and even then the CIA would be informed.

Besides, no way was Martin Kaiser getting the President involved in something like this.

Not the current President, at least.

But maybe the next one.

Rhett didn't answer Blondie's question about Senator Robinson's trust level. Marcus Robinson was smart, savvy, and an excellent judge of character. Of course, Rhett had thirty years of practice running circles around people at all levels of business and politics. Still, women were always the easier targets for Rhett. It allowed him to use his natural talents and inclinations. Sure, he'd used his sexuality on men too when the job called for it, but it wasn't his preference.



And it sure as hell wasn't Robinson's preference. Not with a smoking-hot wife like Princess Delilah. The ass of a goddess. Tits that always looked heavy and full of milk from the five healthy kids she'd popped out and the new one growing in her big belly. Shit, at first Rhett had considered trying to work *that* angle, perhaps use Delilah to get to the Senator indirectly. But Delilah was a sharp cookie too, and by all outward appearances seemed to actually *love* her Senator husband as a person and not just a means to an end.

Something that Rhett was self-aware enough to know he would never understand. He just wasn't wired that way. He'd known it early on in life, known what kind of man he was.

Hell, in those early days he'd even tried to be honest with the women about the kind of man he was inside. But still so many of those dumb hussies tricked themselves into believing they could change him, turn him, fucking *trap* him.

Trap him with the oldest trick in the book.

Well, no chance of that happening again, Rhett thought with warm relief. He wasn't going to be knocking up any more women. He'd been taking testosterone injections for almost two decades now, and one of the very useful side-effects of jacking yourself up with synthetic testosterone was that the

body shut down its own production in response to the heightened levels of the hormone.

Which meant the body stopped producing sperm.

It didn't affect arousal or even ejaculate volume, but there were no swimmers in Rhett's semen.

What a fucking relief.

After all, it was those damn swimmers of his that had flipped his life upside down thirty years ago, when he was just settling in as the youngest Dean of Virginia's Prescott Law School.

A sharp pain stabbed at the inside of Rhett's left eye, making him wince. Or maybe it was the memory of that raven-haired third-year law student from New Delhi, India, that dark-skinned whore who'd gotten herself knocked up and then refused to do the right thing, insisted on keeping the child.

If only Rhett had been the man he was now.

If only he'd had the balls to break her neck before she popped out that bastard child and set this whole thing into motion.

"You will change your mind when you lay eyes upon your daughter," the bitch had insisted, batting her long black lashes,

widening her big brown eyes. “Wait and see. Your natural instincts will kick in and you will be grateful we kept the child. I know it.”

Rhett rubbed his eyes, trying to push away the memory of that woman. They’d been together barely a year, but Rhett couldn’t deny that their time together had been electric, ecstatic, almost transcendent.

Maybe it was just how exotic the Indian woman had seemed to a Southern boy like him. But Rhett had always suspected it wasn’t just that. It wasn’t just the sex, wasn’t just the craving for her flesh, wasn’t just the way she moaned out words in her mysterious mother-tongue as she came. There had been something more with that woman, a connection that had always felt different, deeper, maybe even darker.

But that connection was dead now.

Along with the woman and that bastard baby who ruined everything.

Now Rhett’s jaw tightened as he stared out the window blankly. It had been thirty years and he was still unsettled about how everything had gone down. It had been a blur of accidents and events, hasty decisions and life-changing choices.

With John Benson somehow at the center of it all.

And now Benson was back in Rhett's life.

Bringing all those old memories back with him.

“Get back into the system.” Rhett forced away those unsettling memories which had been dredged up by Benson's visit that morning. “See if we have any NOC assets in Mumbai.”

Blondie stiffened. “Non-Official Cover Operatives? I ... I don't know if I can get into those files, Rhett. They're the most protected layer in the entire CIA system. I don't know what sort of alerts might get triggered if we try to activate an NOC asset. Kaiser himself might get an alert.”

Rhett shook his head, his eyes sparkling. “No, he won't. That's the whole point of NOC. Non official means no connection to the CIA or any U.S. agency. Plausible deniability. The system was redesigned to leave no electronic trails. Only the asset's handler has knowledge. It's strictly compartmentalized. The CIA Director needs to be able to deny all knowledge if Congress asks him under oath. And there are no electronic records that can be uncovered via Freedom of Information Act requests.”

Blondie's eyelids fluttered as she thought. She bit her lower lip, hunched forward in her chair, rocking back and forth slowly. Rhett watched her carefully. Blondie was smart enough to know that this was crossing a very dangerous line, perhaps the final line.

"Hey," he said, flashing a warm smile as he walked over to her. He went down on a knee in front of her chair, leaned in and kissed her gently, carefully, cupping his right hand around the back of her neck, sliding his tongue into her mouth, stroking her nipple with his other hand until it stiffened under his touch. "You know I love you, right?"

Blondie moaned gently and nodded as Rhett broke from the kiss. She took a long breath, sighed it out, then swiveled her chair around and got to work.

Rhett stood behind her, watching as the firewalls came down. He knew his own name was once in this database. Just the first name Rhett, the codename he'd selected all those years ago. But it was long gone from the system now. There were no case files on NOC operations. All electronic communications between asset and handler were sent via the system through military-grade encryption with tightly enforced disappearing messages. It was quite literally a *burn-*

*after-reading* system. There would be no records on any computer server anywhere in the world for these sorts of operations which were unconstitutional at best, downright criminal at worst.

“Damn.” Blondie glanced back at him, an incredulous smile on her clumsily made-up face. “What are the chances?”

Rhett leaned over Blondie’s shoulder, squinted at her laptop screen. She’d gotten into the NOC database, had run a geo-location search on available assets in the Mumbai area.

There was just one hit.

A woman.

Codename *Scarlet*.

Rhett and Scarlet?

Nice try, Benson. How stupid do you think I am?

Rhett swallowed thickly, certain it was a dark joke, that Benson had predicted this move and gotten into the NOC database to set a trap or perhaps just taunt Rhett, flip him the bird like it was all a game. It would be just like that old coyote to plant a nonexistent fake asset codenamed *Scarlet* to trap a predator named *Rhett*.

After all, Benson had been right there thirty years ago when the man formerly known as something else became Rhett.

And there'd been a Scarlet too, all those years ago, hadn't there?

Of course, Rhett called many of the girls he fucked back then *Scarlet* in the privacy of his filthy fantasies. Sure, there was one Scarlet who stood out, would always stand out because of how she changed the trajectory of his life. But that raven-haired dark-eyed bitch was long gone, just like her bastard child.

Gone with the fucking wind, thank hell for that.

“Rhett and Scarlet, am I right?” Blondie teased. “Looks like you aren't the only *Gone with the Wind* fan. Is this fate, Rhett? Destiny? Meant to be?” She grinned up at him, her fingers poised on the keyboard. Then she took a breath, the smile fading as she waited for his command. “Should I go ahead and activate her? Send her Wagner and O'Donnell's photographs and location? Instructions to take out O'Donnell and make it seem plausible that Wagner did it?”

Rhett placed his hands on Blondie's shoulders and squeezed as his brain tried to squeeze its way out through his

damn ears. “Wait,” he managed to croak through the tightness in his throat. “Don’t open that file yet. It might be a trap. Benson may have planted it there. It might contain a program that traces this back to your computer, to your IP address, something like that.”

Blondie snorted confidently. “Oh, please. The entire art of hacking is to break into a database without anyone knowing you’re in there. I’m piggybacked into the system using Langley’s own internal IP address. My laptop looks like a regular background program running on the server. We’re invisible, Rhett.”

Rhett kept the pressure on her shoulders, shook his head, his mind churning through the choices. He tried to tell himself that Benson didn’t know anything for sure, that the morning visit was just to spook Rhett, to see if he flinched.

But the truth was Rhett *had* flinched.

Benson was back in his life, and suddenly these odd coincidences were showing up all over the place, just like they had thirty years ago, the last time Benson had flashed his coyote grin in Rhett’s direction.

“Almost thirty years,” said Blondie.



“What?”

Blondie pointed at the screen. “There. See? This codename was created almost thirty years ago, Rhett. That’s how long Scarlet has been in NOC. No way to fake that timestamp without me knowing. The file is legit. Scarlet is real. Benson couldn’t have planted it in the system. Well, not now, at least. If he planted Scarlet, he did it thirty years ago—which would still make it legit. She’s definitely a real NOC asset.”

Rhett’s grip on Blondie’s shoulders tightened briefly at the thought of the Scarlet in his life thirty years ago. A wild possibility popped to mind, but Rhett pushed it away, told himself he was being paranoid and there was no way, she was dead and gone, he was crazy to even think it. It was just a codename, and the Agency often got cute with NOC codenames. It was just a coincidence. Especially if Blondie insisted it had been there for a while, wasn’t planted by Benson just to fuck with Rhett.

That made sense, Rhett thought as he relaxed and stroked Blondie’s neck with his thumb. Benson had been out of the CIA seven years now. The chances that Kaiser would give him access to CIA NOC files were slim—even if Kaiser did have a way to get in there, which Rhett highly doubted after that

Congressional hearing where Kaiser had perjured himself by declaring under oath that there was no NOC program of which he was aware.

Which meant Scarlet was real, and she was available for immediate deployment. The name was a startling coincidence, but one that seemed to be working for Rhett, not against him.

Rhett hesitated as he pondered the decision. “Scarlet’s name disappears from the database once we activate her, right?” He generally knew how the NOC system worked—NOC assets who were already deployed on operations wouldn’t show up until they were done with the current mission and available for a new job. He waited as Blondie checked something, then nodded back at him.

Rhett exhaled heavily. This next choice was the point of no return. He could still conceivably step back away from this whole thing, distance himself and see how it played out. Maybe Kaiser would lose his nerve and have O’Donnell killed anyway. If Rhett stepped back now, maybe Benson would lay off, just let it go. After all, Blondie had made it so there was no electronic trail, no verifiable link between India O’Donnell and Rhett Rodgers, nothing that could possibly implicate Rhett in this whole thing. Even if Kaiser decided O’Donnell was

being set up, nothing would lead to Rhett. It would just get covered up and swept away, business as usual in the CIA.

Except Rhett didn't want business as usual to continue.

Not if it meant Martin Kaiser would still be in charge.

This was Rhett's shot at the brass ring, the top spot, the ultimate seat of shadowy power. He had a chance here, but the window of opportunity was closing. Senator Robinson was leading in every poll. Americans on both sides of the political divide liked the man. Once in the White House, Robinson would form his cabinet, appoint his own favorites to the powerful positions in Justice, Treasury, and Intelligence.

Which meant Rhett had one shot to make damn sure he was Robinson's favorite to head up America's premier intelligence agency.

And he was going to take that shot.

Fuck you, Benson, he thought viciously. You're a has-been, a lunatic, a madman. You've always been that, but now with this Darkwater crap a lot more people see that you're off the rails. You're done for, and so is Kaiser for covering your ass all these years.

“Do it,” Rhett said sharply. “Activate Scarlet. Confirm that O’Donnell is the target. Wagner is the patsy. Doesn’t need to hold up in a court of law. O’Donnell just needs to die under mysterious circumstances while Ice Wagner’s with her. Enough ambiguity that Robinson can’t be certain that Kaiser and Benson are innocent of calling in the hit. Best not to use explosives or guns, but give Scarlet free rein to use her judgement. If she’s survived thirty years as a ghost, she’ll figure out the best method.” He watched as Blondie typed out instructions, attached O’Donnell and Wagner’s files. He scanned her instructions, then nodded. “Good. Send it before I change my mind.”

Rhett’s breath caught sharply in his throat as Scarlet’s name flashed on the screen, then disappeared when the encrypted message launched itself into the ether. He held the breath for a long moment, his heart thundering behind his sternum, his morning mixture of caffeine and testosterone making his blood boil hot.

He stood in silence behind Blondie, glanced down at her slender neck. He knew what came next. It would take barely a second. He’d do it quick and clean from behind, make it as

painless as he could. Blondie wasn't a target, after all. She was just collateral damage.

Now Rhett placed his palm on the back of her neck, stroking upwards beneath her hair. She moaned and arched her head back, looked up at him upside-down like a cat, even purring a little as he brought his palm around and cupped the front of her throat.

Rhett closed his eyes and took a breath, slowly brought his other hand up behind her head to give him the two-sided leverage that would snap her neck like a chicken, turn out the lights quick and clean. Then he'd wipe down the apartment and leave her there until nightfall. Come back with an unregistered truck, take her body out to Chesapeake Bay, weigh her down with metal plates, then drop her into that deep spot off the shore where the crabs were big and hungry this time of the year. They'd tear open her flesh so fast the body wouldn't have time to bloat up with gases from the stomach and intestine. Within a couple of days Blondie would be a skeleton, and last time Rhett checked, bare bones don't float.

Now Rhett's hands were in position, left palm cupping her throat, right palm flat around the back of her head. He took a breath, steadied his heart for the viciously quick moment.

And suddenly a phone rang.

Rhett cursed inwardly, his gaze flicking to where Blondie's cell phone sat silent beside the laptop. The phone was off and the battery was out, just like Rhett had instructed. Blondie also ran a cell-signal blocker in her apartment, and there was no way anyone could bypass all of that. Even Rhett's own phone wouldn't pick up a signal here.

"Shit. It's my home phone." Blondie jerked forward, out of his grasp, her cheeks bright red with mortified embarrassment. "I'm so sorry, Rhett. Nobody ever calls that land-line." She turned in the chair, smiled up at him. "Probably a wrong number. Or maybe the telemarketers finally got me on their list. It'll stop in a minute."

Rhett nodded stiffly, his body tensed up and rigid from the adrenaline pumping through his veins, thundering through his arteries. He frowned deep, a sudden paranoia rising up his throat.

He'd already considered the possibility that Benson might put a Darkwater man on his tail—which was why he'd walked here from Dupont Circle. Rhett was a master of the shadow-game, and while on foot he could spot a tail in any city, in any weather, in any scenario. No way he was followed here by a

human. As for electronic surveillance? Well, there was definitely nothing on Rhett's body. He'd changed clothes, including shoes, before coming to Blondie's—just in case Benson had managed to hide a tracking device on Rhett during that morning visit.

Rhett closed his eyes and exhaled, satisfied that he hadn't been followed, that unless Benson could somehow commandeer an NSA satellite on short notice, there was no way the bastard could know Rhett was here. And Rhett had been very careful with Blondie, working her so completely that he was absolutely sure she hadn't uttered a word to a coworker or a best friend about them.

So it can't be Benson, Rhett told himself. Stop being paranoid. He tried to spook you this morning and looks like he succeeded. Don't lose your nerve. It's been years since you played this sort of game. You're just rusty, perhaps a bit jumpy. Settle down.

But it was hard to settle down when that damn phone kept ringing like a fleet of fire-trucks coming out of the wall.

“Sorry, there's no voice mail, so it'll keep ringing,” Blondie said apologetically. She stood from the chair, hurried over to the white corded phone on the wall. “Here. I'll

disconnect it.” She reached for the wire, then froze when her gaze rested on the caller-ID panel. She stared for a long moment, then turned wide-eyed, the blood draining from her face. “Caller ID says Langley, Virginia, Central Intelligence Agency,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “That would never show up on a call from Langley unless the caller specifically overrides the caller-ID blocking to make sure we know it’s the CIA calling. I . . . I should answer it, shouldn’t I?”

Rhett’s vision blurred, and he almost swayed on his feet from the rush of adrenaline-saturated blood throbbing through his tensed-up body. His jaw was so tight he could barely speak, and he just about managed a grim nod.

“Remember, I’m not here,” he rasped just before she snatched up the handset.

Blondie nodded in his direction, then placed the white phone to her ear. “Paige Anderson speaking,” she said in an impressively professional tone that mostly concealed the fear Rhett could see in her eyes. “Sorry? I don’t understand.” She curled a strand of blond hair around her ear, her cheeks reddening, her eyes wide like saucers as she turned and stared at Rhett. “Sir, I’m not currently working on anything for



Mister Rodgers. At least, not that I know of. There must be some kind of mistake. I'm at home alone right now. I'm scheduled to work nights at Langley. I'm sure we can clear this up when—" She stopped abruptly, her thin throat tightening as she swallowed hard and flashed Rhett a look of petrified apology. "Yes, Director Kaiser. I understand. I'll report to your office the moment I get to Langley this evening." She swallowed again, shrugging helplessly, a forlorn puppy-dog expression making her look very much like a scared little girl as she stretched out a trembling hand with the white telephone. "It's for you. Director Kaiser."

Rhett stared at the phone like it was an alien succubus come to steal his soul. How the fuck did Kaiser know he was here?!

Rage burned hot in his eyes as he glared at Blondie, wished to hell he'd snapped her neck an hour ago instead of giving her that final ride on his testosterone-fueled erection. Though of course that might have turned out worse for him—given that Director Kaiser already seemed to know he was in her apartment.

Rhett considered just walking out of there without saying a word. But Blondie—he hated the name Paige; it smacked of

New Age whimsy that turned Rhett's stomach—had already gone weak at the knees and given him up at the sound of Kaiser's voice. Besides, Rhett had no idea how they'd tracked him down here. He was certain he hadn't been tailed—though perhaps he'd lost his edge and one of those Darkwater guys had followed him after all.

His gut churned as he took the phone and held it silently for a long moment. Rhett had been in situations that had looked way more hopeless than this. And he was still here, wasn't he? Still in the game. Still with a shot at winning. It was never over until the final buzzer.

Now confidence born out of years of mastery came to Rhett's rescue. Kaiser wouldn't be calling if he knew anything for certain. He'd have sent in some hard men through the front door, put a black hood over Rhett's head, dragged him out of there and shoved him into an unmarked Chevy Suburban with tinted windows. In fact it was strange as hell that Kaiser himself would be calling.

Unless it wasn't Kaiser.

After all, Blondie had probably never spoken directly with Martin Kaiser. She wouldn't know his voice from another man's.

“You sonofabitch,” Rhett whispered into the phone, already feeling the coyote-smile on the other end of the line. “You were fishing, weren’t you? Calling every female operations-tech and bluffing your way in like the two-faced cocksucker you are. All right, you got me, John. I’m an unmarried man having an inter-office romance with an unmarried junior staffer who isn’t my direct subordinate. Hardly an earthshattering violation.” Rhett took a breath. He had to assume this was being recorded—perhaps Benson hoped to get something to show Robinson that Rhett was involved. No problem. Rhett could turn this back on Benson. “I see what’s happening here. Your Darkwater cover-ups have fucked Kaiser’s reputation, and you know I’d be Robinson’s pick to replace old Martin. So now you’re trying to fix it for your buddy Kaiser. Get some dirt on me to hurt my reputation with Senator Robinson. But an office-romance scandal? That’s the best you can do?” Rhett knew there were more skeletons in his closet, but Benson and he shared that same thirty-year-old closet. The old coyote couldn’t use their shared history to bring Rhett down because it would make Benson look even worse, taint Kaiser by association with Benson. Confidence swelling now, Rhett turned it up a notch. “Sad to see how far

you've fallen, John. This is washed-up private-eye level crap. What's your next assignment? Searching for a missing cat?"

Benson chuckled at the other end of the line. "I'm more of a dog person."

"You're a piece of fucking work." Rhett grinned into the mouthpiece. "Does Kaiser even know you're making prank calls from Langley?"

"Not yet, but he will by the time Paige Anderson shows up in his office tonight."

Rhett glanced sharply towards the open laptop. Blondie was hunched over the keyboard, squinting as logfiles and computer code scrolled across the screen. She hit a few keys, then swiveled around to face him.

She shook her head firmly, communicating with absolute confidence that nobody could have caught them in the system. Blondie might be insecure when it came to her looks, but she was unflappably self-assured when it came to her skills with a keyboard and an encrypted network connection.

Which meant Benson was still fishing.

Rhett was still in the game.

Rhett took a breath and considered his options. There weren't a lot. This phone call wasn't going to sink Rhett, but it was going to severely restrict his abilities.

Because he could no longer use Blondie.

Benson had taken a player off the board.

Saved her damn life too.

A solid chess move, Rhett grudgingly admitted as his cheeks burned with the realization that Benson was still very much a master of the game.

Benson knew exactly how Rhett's mind worked.

Knew that Rhett would choose a female target to handle the tech stuff.

Knew that Benson's morning visit would spook Rhett enough to make him want to tie up loose ends, make sure there was nobody alive to tell tales.

And Benson had gone old-school with this. The guy must have simply pulled a list of every female techie and worked the damn phones until he got a bite, caught his fish. Yeah, Benson's immediate goal was just to save Blondie's life, cut down the collateral damage, Rhett thought angrily. The guy could match Rhett for ruthlessness any day of the week, but

there was also something else in Benson's psychological and emotional makeup that defied definition, was hard to articulate, even harder to understand.

Especially for a man like Rhett, for whom collateral damage was an essential part of the game—sometimes even the *fun* part of the game.

Rhett sighed pointedly into the phone. "All right, you win. Go ahead and destroy a smart young woman's career to make me look bad. Kaiser can't fire her for this, but once word gets around, nobody will take Paige seriously. You know how vicious the rumor mill gets. So think about how that looks for Martin Kaiser, for the Director to get involved in something trivial and petty like this. I'm sure Senator Robinson will be very impressed with what his CIA Director is spending his time on these days." Rhett snorted. "Anything else, Benson?"

Benson stayed silent. Rhett could hear him breathe, maybe even hear him think. Rhett waited for the bait, was almost looking forward to a little verbal sparring, master versus master, with Benson trying to make Rhett incriminate himself.

Bring it, Benson, Rhett thought as his lips tightened to a smirk. I'll turn it around on you and Kaiser, make the two of

you look like big bullies playing office politics. Come on, Benson. Step into the ring.

“Just make sure Paige Anderson shows up for work tonight. And every night.” Benson’s words came sharp and quick, followed by the click of the phone line going dead.

Rhett smiled tightly as he placed the handset back into its wall-cradle. Benson hadn’t even said the name O’Donnell, which meant he had nothing concrete on Rhett, was going on just a hunch, wasn’t absolutely certain that Rhett was behind the O’Donnell setup.

Which meant Benson and Kaiser definitely wanted to keep this quiet—for now, at least. Benson had made this call to save Blondie and take her off the board, and that was enough for this move.

Though of course there was a follow-up move: Benson and Kaiser would certainly try to get Blondie to flip, to give Rhett up this evening when she got to Langley.

It was certainly possible that Blondie would crack under the pressure of being questioned by Director Kaiser himself, Rhett thought grimly as he strolled past the nervously twitching Blondie and sank down into that pink sofa. But Rhett couldn’t kill her now. Didn’t matter if he staged a perfect

suicide or a gangland killing or a highway accident or made it so that her body straight-up vaporized into thin fucking air. CIA didn't give a shit about evidence that needed to hold up in court. This single phone call had pretty much guaranteed Blondie was untouchable, that Rhett had no choice but to let her walk into that office tonight and every night.

If Blondie went missing, the game was over for Rhett. It would look too sketchy for him if Benson played Robinson a recording of this phone-call. Even if there wasn't enough to prove Rhett did anything to Blondie, his reputation would be tainted. No way Robinson could seriously consider Rhett for Director with something like that hanging over him.

“You know I won't say anything, right?” Blondie's voice was thin and peaked. “I'm one-hundred percent sure there's no electronic trail for what we've done. I'll come clean about our relationship, take the hit if they fire me. But I won't give you up, Rhett.”

Rhett glanced up from the sofa. “Won't give *yourself* up, you mean. Because if there is an electronic trail, it leads back to you, not me.” He shrugged coolly. “If Kaiser or anyone else questions me about anything to do with hacking into O'Donnell's phone and planting that stuff, I'll just say you



engineered the whole thing to fuck me. That it was a genius MIT grad with low self-esteem trying to get back at me for dumping her. Jilted lover syndrome. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. That kind of thing.”

“Wait, what?” Blondie’s eyelids fluttered, her fingernails digging into the foam armrests of her black swivel chair. Her voice wavered as she spoke. “It *won’t* come back to you, Rhett, I swear! I’ll hold up under the pressure. For you I will.” She forced a trembling smile. “For *us* I will. You won’t need to say all that. And you’re right—since I’m not a direct subordinate, we aren’t breaking any CIA rules with our affair. I’ll tell them we’re in love, and that’ll be the end of it.” Her blue eyes brightened. “Oh, Rhett, that means we won’t need to keep it a secret any longer.”

There is no *we*, you dumb whore, Rhett thought viciously. But the smile he gave her betrayed none of that venom, hiding it all behind a well-rehearsed veneer of warm affection, loving trust, the kind of thing that turned these clueless kittens into panting lapdogs who would happily die for him.

And most certainly *lie* for him.

“I love you, Paige,” he whispered gently, his heart almost warming when he saw her shoulders slump in relief, those

premature worry-lines on her forehead disappear for an instant, making her look almost pretty from the inner glow of what he supposed was love.

Whatever gets the job done, Rhett thought callously as he stood from the sofa, leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips, wondering if the silly chicken knew how close she'd come to getting her neck wrung.

"I love you too, Rhett," she cooed back at him, her doe-eyes big and blue and shining with an adoration that produced a sudden flash of contempt in Rhett.

You owe Benson your life, he thought as he rewarded her with another smile, then patted her cheek and gestured towards the laptop with his head. "Are you certain there's no way for anyone to know that we activated Scarlet?"

Blondie nodded. "That's how this system is set up. I checked the code. Scarlet doesn't even exist in the system until she completes her mission and checks back in as available for redeployment."

Rhett relaxed. He wasn't a tech genius, but he understood how the protocols worked. An NOC asset once deployed was a ghost to everyone except her handler.

Then something occurred to Rhett. He frowned, his jaw tightening, his throat going dry.

“Tell me something,” Rhett said, stepping back as he went over the protocol in his mind, connecting it with his superficial understanding of what Blondie had done with her hacker-magic. “The way this normally works is that the handler is able to communicate with the asset through encrypted chat. But if you hacked in, there’s no handler assigned to Scarlet, is there? Which means we can’t communicate with her now. Is that right?”

Blondie turned crimson, her eyelids fluttering like a butterfly in its death throes. “Shit.” She gulped, turned to the laptop, hit a few keys, then shook her head without daring to look up into Rhett’s eyes. “Didn’t think of that. You’re right. Scarlet got the first message with our instructions, but now we have no way of communicating with her. We won’t know anything unless we see her name pop back onto the list, which means she’s completed her mission and is back in the pool of available assets.” She sneaked a scared look upwards at Rhett. “I can keep monitoring the list to see if—”

“No,” Rhett said sharply. “They’ll be watching your every move. It’s too risky. You’re not to do anything unauthorized in

the CIA systems from now on. I don't give a shit how good you think you are—we can't take a chance when Benson already suspects I'm involved.”

Blondie nodded, her shoulders relaxing in relief. Rhett studied her face for a long moment, then decided she would probably hold up under Kaiser's questioning—if Benson even made good on his threat to get Kaiser involved.

But either way, Rhett knew he couldn't use her anymore, not even to send a damn email message. Even the smallest bit of evidence that Blondie was involved in the O'Donnell setup would immediately implicate Rhett—or at least make it look sketchy enough that Robinson would scratch *Rhett Rodgers* off the short-list for the next Director.

He snatched up his jacket, slung it over his shoulder, forced himself to kiss Blondie one more time to make sure she kept those lips sealed. Then he was out the door, taking the stairs to the back exit, stepping out in the afternoon sunshine.

Rhett glanced at his watch, realized he was due at the Hoover Building for a meeting with some FBI clowns. He pulled up his phone and ordered a ride. He didn't need to worry about hiding his current location.

After all, he was never coming back here.

Blondie was history.

He'd keep fucking her until Kaiser went down, then string her along for a while longer, until he was secure in his spot in the corner office.

And then he'd make sure she disappeared.

Because loose ends didn't just tie themselves up.

They stuck around like ticking time-bombs.

Just like that eternally ticking time-bomb from thirty years ago.

When John Benson had caught Rhett making his first kill.

A kill that still haunted Rhett, even though he knew it shouldn't.

After all, that bastard child was barely a few days old when Rhett smothered her like an unwanted kitten.

Yeah, just a few days old, not even a real person yet.

Hell, the kid didn't even have a name.

## **SCARLET.**

India O'Donnell. What a silly name, thought the woman codenamed Scarlet.

The name of the new target which had come through on her CIA-issued phone had immediately struck Scarlet as rather comical. It sounded completely made-up, something an enthusiastic CIA intern might come up with while crafting an NOC profile.

Not that Scarlet put too much stock in names. She'd had so many over the past thirty years that her "real" name was barely a memory in the mists of her mind.

"Mind your head," called a uniformed busboy as Scarlet ducked beneath the plastic-wrapped garments whirring about on an automated turnstile that wound like a multi-colored anaconda through the laundry room tucked deep in the windowless bowels of Mumbai's Raj Palace Hotel.

Scarlet offered the busboy a tight-lipped smile, avoiding eye contact so she wouldn't be memorable. She waited until he

swept past her, then she ducked again, this time staying crouched and quickly moving beneath the clothes-train to the open space behind it. She glanced left and right down the lines of humming washers and spinning dryers, then pulled her raven-black hair into a ponytail neat enough to look professional and nondescript enough to be forgettable.

She walked past the laundry machines, past the dry-cleaning room, scanning the laundry workers busy at their washing and drying and pressing and folding stations. They didn't even glance in her direction. Scarlet had already dressed her lithe fifty-something-year-old body in the Raj Palace's standard brown uniform, and now she snatched up a name-tag from a plastic basket near a mesh-bag stuffed with soiled hotel uniforms.

It was a man's name tag. Scarlet didn't think anyone would notice, but she was a perfectionist and so she tossed it back into the basket and rummaged through until she found something that suited her gauntly feminine face and dark sunken eyes and worry-lines that had been building for thirty years, deepening every time that unmarked CIA-issued encrypted phone buzzed with a new assignment, a new mission.

A new target.

“Why do they want to kill you, India O’Donnell,” Scarlet whispered in the sing-song voice which helped her calm down before she turned out the lights for another human soul. The ritual was somewhat new—most of her career in the shadows Scarlet hadn’t needed to “calm herself down” before a kill.

Because the kill itself was what made her calm.

Gave her a purpose.

Gave her an outlet.

To unleash what she’d never gotten a chance to unleash all those years ago.

Because the asshole was lucky enough to already be dead.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, Scarlet thought with an icy smile. So maybe we’ll meet again in hell when the time comes, you treacherous piece of shit.

Law-school Dean knocks up foreign Third-Year student, then dumps her brown ass when she wants to keep the child. How fucking romantic. A great American love story on par with *Gone with the Wind*, wasn’t it?

Scarlet snorted inwardly at the memory of how that Southern sweet-talker would sometimes call her Scarlet to his



Rhett, whisper lines from the classic novel which he said was a holy book in the American South—said it as he fingered her unholy buttohole and told her to come for him like the filthy Indian slut she was.

The memories still burned in her, all these years later. She'd been so close to ending that story her way, destroying that bastard along with his bastard child, writing her own happily-ever-after, riding off into the American sunset with a law degree and a reputation that would take her places.

Except she'd been cheated out of that ending, gotten trapped in someone else's story. This was her place now, thanks to that coyote John Benson.

For one dark moment she wondered what Benson had done with the child's body. The girl was so tiny, Scarlet remembered with uncharacteristic melancholy, a sadness she sure as hell hadn't felt all those years ago when she had it all planned out, written the script to her own drama, chosen her own fate, decided on her own destiny.

Shaking away the memories that had been popping up more often these days, she stabbed the badge-pin through her uniform just above the swell of her left breast.

And for one startling moment Scarlet had a vision of that doomed child's tiny lips closed tight around that left breast, tiny fingers clawing at her bare brown skin, tiny eyes looking up at Mama with awe and wonder, anticipation and adoration, demands and expectations.

Expectations that Scarlet knew she could never meet.

She'd known it then and she knew it now.

But she'd been at peace with it then.

So why wasn't she at peace with it now?

Why now, after lying dormant for decades, were those memories forcing their way into her consciousness, coming more often with each passing year, like a countdown leading up to something, a ticking time-bomb that felt ominously close to going off?

Maybe it's just your fucked-up brain warning you there's an aneurysm coming, Scarlet told herself with dark amusement as she stepped lightly to where a harried-looking young clerk with a plastic-wrapped stack of freshly laundered-and-pressed clothes under his armpit was squinting at a thumbprint-stained touchscreen computer monitor. The Raj Palace Hotel's laundry room seemed to run on a self-service basis, with each

attendant logging in their dirty-clothes bundles and then being responsible for picking up the same clothes when they were ready.

And Scarlet was cutting in line.

She wasn't going to actually take those clothes up to the room, of course. Her handler's instructions said she was to be discreet, stay off the radar, definitely off the security cameras. But Scarlet needed to get to those laundered clothes first, just for a few seconds, just long enough to do what she'd come to do.

She wasn't worried about being caught down here in the laundry room. It would be a different matter if she had to sneak into the kitchens where the Room Service carts were being loaded with breakfast for the hotel's early risers. The Raj Palace took food safety very seriously, and Scarlet would have needed to be more careful, which would mean she'd have needed more time. Time she didn't have.

But luck had smiled on her. While prepping in her sprawling empty flat perched high in one of Mumbai's glass-and-steel towers, Scarlet had deployed the handy technology spyware-tool on her phone to snoop inside the Raj Palace Hotel's computer systems. Immediately she'd noticed the open

laundry-service ticket tagged with O'Donnell and Wagner's room number. She'd drilled down on the logged entry, her heart speeding when she saw a list of women's clothes—pants, top, bra, panties.

It felt like a gift, one of those coincidences which signaled things were flowing her way, going her way, just like they always seemed to go on a mission, thirty years and counting, defying so many odds that she'd still be here, still alive, still hunting.

Hunting for something that always felt just out of reach.

Back at her apartment Scarlet had put down the CIA-issued phone, smiled tightly to herself, then hurried to her walk-in closet and found the "Uniforms" section and pulled out a perfectly pressed and sublimely sized set that matched the Raj Palace colors well enough that she could breeze in and out of the laundry room unseen like a ghost in the mist.

She'd have no trouble slipping into the Raj Palace in the wee hours of the morning. She was intimately familiar with the majestic hotel, even more familiar with its security provisions.

Still, while the open laundry ticket was a welcome break, things would get trickier from there, she'd known. The Room

Service area would have been harder to get into but easier to pull off once she made it to the right cart. Alas, it was not to be. O'Donnell and Wagner hadn't ordered breakfast yet.

What a shame.

Because there were *so* many exotic poisons Scarlet would have loved to use on silly-named India O'Donnell.

Instead she'd have to improvise, use the freshly laundered clothes to deliver the payload.

And that would be tricky.

She couldn't just lace the clothes with anthrax or cyanide or some other potent toxin that could be absorbed via the skin. Those poisons were so volatile and deadly Scarlet might kill herself applying them to the clothes. She would use transparent polyurethane gloves, but to handle the hardcore chemicals Scarlet would also need a gas-mask, and that would most certainly attract attention from the other laundry workers—not to mention the security cameras. Even if she pulled it off, the fumes might kill the hotel attendant unlucky enough to pick up the lethal bundle. And then there was a risk that Wagner would open the door, even unwrap the clothes himself. Anthrax or cyanide might kill Wagner instead of O'Donnell.

And that wasn't part of the plan.

Scarlet's instructions had been concise but clear—by CIA standards, at least. The Agency never made things too explicit in writing—even with space-age encryption combined with zero-logging and disappearing messages. Paranoia was the rule. Assume anything which *can* be discovered *will* be discovered.

So of course, Scarlet had to do a little reading between the lines, fill in some blanks, extrapolate and elucidate.

The message had been coded with standard CIA terminology and purposely ambiguous acronyms. Loosely translated, the message said O'Donnell was the target and Wagner was the patsy. But the rest of the carefully worded message made it clear—in that murky CIA way—that the kill didn't need to hold up in a court of law, didn't need airtight evidence, wasn't going to be put in front of a jury and subjected to rigorous tests of reasonable doubt.

CIA didn't play by those rules.

That crap was for the FBI, who actually had to pay attention to the U.S. Constitution.

So all Scarlet needed to do was kill O'Donnell while the woman was in Wagner's presence, making sure not to kill Wagner himself in the process. And do it surreptitiously, without Scarlet herself being seen, without making it obvious that a third party was involved. The circumstances of the kill needed to be inconclusive enough for it to seem plausible that Wagner pulled the trigger.

Not that anyone would be pulling any triggers. Scarlet couldn't use a gun. She'd have been able to sneak a handgun into the hotel no problem, but leaving a bullet in O'Donnell's head which wouldn't match Wagner's weapon felt too risky. Besides, going *bang-bang-bang* at sunrise in a hotel corridor with security cameras watching wasn't going to cut it.

Especially not with an armed Delta guy in the mix.

Scarlet didn't fear death, but she didn't have a death-wish either.

Not yet, at least.

Because it felt like she wasn't done hunting yet.

Felt like there was still some purpose to living.

She'd been feeling it more and more as she got older, as those troubling images from her past got clearer even as they

got darker.

At first Scarlet had assumed it was the massive hormonal changes that were hitting her as she passed fifty. But she'd been prepared for those changes, had enlisted the services of an excellent endocrinologist, was using top quality synthetics to replace the hormones her body no longer produced as she crossed that threshold which all women were cursed to traverse.

Or in Scarlet's case, *blessed*.

No more popping the damn pill.

No more inserting those wretched sperm-killing devices.

No more wondering if she'd ever have to do *that* again.

Do what she'd done thirty years ago.

Scarlet shoved aside the memory as she tapped the laundry-room's touchscreen monitor, pulled up the logged entry, checked to see if O'Donnell's clothes had been washed and dried and picked and packed.

Not yet.

Scarlet had a few minutes. She stepped lightly away from the computer screen, disappearing silently into the rows of hanging clothes like the ghost she was.



Waiting alone in the shadows was part of her work.

Though lately it had become the hardest part.

Because all that time gave Scarlet's mind too much space to wander down the misty alleys of the past.

Wander and wonder.

How would her life have turned out if that CIA man *hadn't* shown up that morning all those years ago?

Shown up because he knew what she'd done.

Shown up like he already knew how he was going to use it against her.

Shown up like the coyote he proved himself to be that morning thirty years ago.

John fucking Benson.

The name had echoed in Scarlet's head back at her flat, shortly after getting her instructions, her mission, her target.

A target that worked for the Company.

A woman who worked for the CIA.

The Agency was taking out one of their own.

Felt a bit too close to home, Scarlet had thought as a hint of dread trickled through her. She'd brushed off the feeling,

knowing that every NOC asset who'd been in the game this long got to wondering about when her own name would land on someone's target list. CIA wasn't exactly known for letting their secrets ride off into the sunset with a retirement package and a non-disclosure agreement.

The dread didn't last long as Scarlet started her prep-work. The anxiety was quickly pushed aside by the exhilarating thrill that invaded her mind and body every time a new mission came through. She'd quickly reviewed the instructions again, noting the stress on secrecy, on remaining unseen.

Not easy to stay unseen with a Delta guy watching, Scarlet knew. Those guys were trained to be ghosts themselves, which meant Scarlet needed to be straight-up invisible.

Guns and explosives were out of the question. She could use a knife, but that would mean getting close enough, which would be near impossible without being seen—and probably killed—by the Delta guy.

That left just chemical weapons, Scarlet had decided back at her flat. She'd quickly stepped into the little hidden room tucked behind the open kitchen which was spotless like a surgery ward. Her mind raced through options as she perused her pantry of poisons. She couldn't risk getting close enough

to inject something into O'Donnell—certainly not intravenously, probably not even subcutaneously. There was no Room Service order in the system, so that ruled out any poison that could be mixed into scrambled eggs or dissolved into orange juice or stirred into coffee.

Which took her back to the open laundry-ticket.

That was her way in.

“What can I layer cleanly onto cloth,” Scarlet had mused as she scanned her chemical-stacked shelves. “It can't smell too much, can't stain too much, can't be too volatile, can't be too caustic. If she touches it and it stings, the gig is up. Shit. Not much to choose from. You're going to have to get creative. Improvise.”

Scarlet ran her sharp gaze along the neatly labelled vials and bottles once again. There were several options almost as lethal as cyanide, but none that would work as fast. So many chemical and plant compounds that could destroy a human from the inside—clog a person's kidneys, choke the life out of a liver, slowly constrict arteries until a clot formed and stopped the heart.

But all of that took time.

Days at the minimum, weeks sometimes.

Scarlet had been given twenty-four hours.

The timeline narrowed it down to just a few compounds. The delivery method via cloth limited her options even more severely. Some poisons that were easy to apply to cloth wouldn't be absorbed well through the skin and would require vast doses to be slathered onto O'Donnell's clothes. Others would leave colored residue on the clothes that would be easy to see. A few would smell too bad to be undetectable. Others would be too harsh on the skin for O'Donnell to not rip her clothes off screaming before the poison got fully absorbed.

Scarlet had whooshed out an anxious breath, wondering if maybe poisons weren't such a good idea after all. Whatever she used would have to be virtually undetectable at all stages—application, absorption, and autopsy. Anything else would compromise the mission.

Not that the Delta guy would have any doubt that a third party was involved, Scarlet knew. Wagner's file said he'd started off in Military Police. That meant he understood evidence, would probably make a convincing argument against anything that pointed to him doing the kill.

But this wasn't about outsmarting Wagner so much as it was about not giving Wagner anything concrete he could use to defend himself. Someone had already decided that Wagner was going to be collateral damage, and this wasn't going to be tried in a court of law.

Plausible deniability, not reasonable doubt.

Just make it *plausible* that Wagner did it, Scarlet had told herself as she wavered between options. The real mission was India O'Donnell. Wagner was just an unfortunate side-effect, a sacrificial pawn in a game of kings being played at Langley.

Still, even the undetectable poisons took a few minutes to break down and dissipate in the blood and organs of a dead body, Scarlet had thought again with a stab of disappointment. If O'Donnell just keeled over and died in the room, Wagner might immediately take a blood sample from her dead body as insurance in case he was being set up. He could get it tested himself, and if anything showed up, it would be damn hard to argue that a big tough Delta killer would bother poisoning a woman who was almost certainly no match for him physically.

After all, if Wagner had been directly ordered to kill O'Donnell, he'd just do it straight-up with a blade or a bullet. If it needed to look like an accident, maybe he'd stage a head-

wound in the shower or a hit-and-run on the street. After all, Mumbai traffic was a deadly killer in its own right.

Shit, it would be so much easier if Scarlet could get them outside onto the crowded city streets. She knew Mumbai like she knew her own body—every secret space, every shadowy place, inside and outside, within and without. Could she wait until they left the hotel?

Scarlet had sighed against the shelf of poisons, quickly checked the time, then gone back into the Raj Palace computer system via her phone, pulled up the reservation under Wagner's alias.

Check-out date was three days in the future.

Of course, they might leave without checking out—in fact, that would be the strategic choice if they suspected anyone was hunting them. But Scarlet had no information to suggest they knew what was coming. And, unfortunately, no information to suggest they were going to leave the safety of their hotel room anytime soon.

“I need more information,” Scarlet had muttered. She'd tried several times to message the mission's anonymous handler, but the system kept erroring out with some cryptic message saying *No Recipient Found*.

Strange and somewhat concerning, Scarlet had thought as that stab of dread pierced her heart once more.

Perhaps this was the inevitable CIA double-cross, her last mission, she'd wondered after trying once more to contact her anonymous handler, see if they'd at least been able to jam the hotel's cameras to give her some breathing space, take some pressure off.

Same error. A sudden spark of frustration made her clutch the phone tight and almost fling it at the wall of neatly shelved poisons.

She fought back the rising anxiety. It was so easy to tell yourself stories while living alone in the shadows, so easy to fall prey to your own paranoia.

Scarlet had walked out onto her broad open-air terrace high above the lamplit streets, taken a deep breath of humid smoggy air, exhaled hard over the awakening city beneath her. The sun was rising in the east, and Scarlet narrowed her eyes at the red glow, searching for that cold hard place in her heart, the ruthlessness which had kept her alive all these years, that mystical place in her mind where intelligence met instinct, where questions based on imperfect information were

answered by intuition, the subconscious part which understood event probabilities.

Scarlet asked that gut-instinct whether she herself was in imminent danger, whether she was the patsy, the fool, the old bitch being put down because she knew too much, had done too much, was destined today to become just another anonymous star on the wall at Langley.

Immediately the answer came that if Langley was going to fuck her, they wouldn't do it this way—certainly not by giving her an unusual mission and then abruptly cutting her communications with some error message. Most likely the handler had screwed up on some technical detail when activating her, and with the extraordinary precautions built into the NOC system, they couldn't get back in touch.

It was the first time she'd been cut off, but not the first time Scarlet had to fly almost blind on a mission. There'd been times when her handlers had gone radio silent, let her connect the dots on her own, make her own decisions—and therefore live alone with the consequences.

Langley operated outside the law, but not outside the self-righteous judgement of the American public if anything got leaked. So Scarlet understood that the puppet-masters at



Langley needed to cover their asses, couldn't help but go overboard to make sure there were no electronic trails that could get leaked or subpoenaed or divulged in those pesky Freedom of Information Act petitions.

Stepping back from the terrace, Scarlet had messaged her local freelance tech-wizard with whom she communicated anonymously via an encrypted account. She ran her fingers through her smooth long hair, shaking it open and tapping her bare foot on the tiles as she waited for the guy to respond.

“Damn it,” she snarled. The message bounced back with a delivery failure notification. The guy had changed phones again. He did it every few weeks to keep any cyber-spooks off his trail. Scarlet had to wait until he got around to broadcasting his new handle to his anonymous clients.

Inconvenient but not a show-stopper, Scarlet had told herself as she padded barefoot like a cat through the long empty living room, her breathing quick but quiet. The hotel cameras weren't that big a deal in the end. She knew how to keep her face off the cameras, and the rest of her wouldn't look particularly unique in a brown uniform.

Besides, she wasn't going to be performing any overtly violent antics in the closed space of the hotel anyway—not

with a Delta Force killer protecting the target.

Well, Scarlet *presumed* Wagner was protecting O'Donnell.

But maybe it wasn't that clear-cut.

Shit, what *was* their relationship, Scarlet had wondered as she walked in circles over the black granite tiles of her eerily unfurnished flat. Why was a twenty-nine-year-old CIA analyst holed up in a swanky Mumbai hotel room with a former Delta guy in the first place?

Were they working on a CIA job together?

Were they off the reservation, doing something they shouldn't?

Were they lovers?

Was this mission something personal for a bigshot at Langley?

Someone high up in the Agency hitting low just to get even with O'Donnell or Wagner or maybe even someone else?

Scarlet didn't know, and she would probably never know. Usually she didn't give a damn—the less irrelevant background she learned about her targets the better.

But this O'Donnell thing had gotten Scarlet curious like a cat.

Because there was something about India O'Donnell's eyes in that file photograph.

Something that touched a part of Scarlet.

A part she thought was long dead.

Dead by her own hand.

Dead against her own breast.

She'd tried to kill the feeling, but it was irritatingly stubborn. Try as she might Scarlet couldn't dismiss the strangely sickening emotion that O'Donnell's eyes had evoked in her.

She'd told herself it was the menopause and the hormone-replacement-therapy mixing with the adrenaline combining with those memories of the past that had been popping up more often recently. The only thing triggering you is the fact that your target is CIA, a woman, one of your own, uncomfortably similar to yourself, Scarlet had reminded herself fiercely.

It had taken some effort, but Scarlet managed to stifle that eerie sensation awakened by O'Donnell's eyes. Still, it was

hard to stop her mind from spinning down a rabbit hole of curiosity as she wondered again why India O'Donnell was being taken out.

Clearly games were being played back in Langley. Scarlet had been an American citizen for thirty years, ever since Benson pushed it through the State Department as part of her deal. Of course, the citizenship record wasn't connected to her Mumbai identity, would never be traced back if she were found dead in a sewer. But in her heart Scarlet harbored a strange love for the United States, her adopted country, the flag she'd been killing for, would probably eventually die for—one way or the other. She'd been following American politics for years, knew that the current President was ending his second term and that next year's election would bring fresh blood to the White House.

And along with that perhaps a new CIA Director?

Was this O'Donnell hit somehow connected to a power-play in Langley?

Scarlet had no idea, and although she was curious about O'Donnell, she really didn't give a damn about CIA power-politics. Langley internal stuff wasn't in her line of sight anyway. She knew the names and faces of Director Martin

Kaiser and the deputy Bill Morris, had seen them on video a couple of times. Of course she knew John Benson by name and face and that fucking coyote grin, but she'd heard from a chatty CIA handler a few missions ago that Benson had quit the Agency a while back to do private security or something like that.

But other than the names Benson, Kaiser, and Morris, Langley was a giant black hole to Scarlet. She'd never even stepped onto the leafy campus of CIA headquarters, wasn't on any CIA distribution list, didn't get invited to the picnics and barbecues, wasn't privy to who was fucking whom and in which hole.

She also didn't have access to CIA internal personnel databases. She'd once asked her tech-wizard to hack in and pull up Benson's file just so she could learn more about that bastard, that wolf-eyed motherfucker who'd "recruited" her by giving her the proverbial "offer she couldn't refuse."

"I *can* break into CIA," the tech-wiz had replied on that encrypted chat. "But I am not stupid enough to do it. It is a suicide mission. They will hunt me down and cut off body parts that will not grow back."

Scarlet had chuckled at the memory as she paced the granite tiles of her flat, glancing at the ticking clock every few seconds, hoping that her phone would beep with a message from her handler before she had to move her butt and get to the Raj Palace.

But the phone stayed silent and smug, its dull face staring lifelessly back at her as if to say she was on her own, that it was all her now, her choice, her decision.

And it *was* a decision, Scarlet had realized back at the flat. She could simply choose to abort the mission, log her name back into the CIA NOC database. In fact maybe that was the right thing to do. Maybe her anonymous handler was waiting to see if Scarlet's name would pop back up on the list of available assets. That way they could re-establish contact.

Scarlet had tapped her CIA phone to life, her thumb poised on the app that would get her back into the NOC system.

Then her phone beeped.

Not the CIA phone, but her personal device.

It was her tech-wizard checking in like an answer to a question, like something in the ether was pushing her onwards, pointing the way, making the choice for her.

Scarlet had suddenly found herself standing at the center of her empty flat, one phone in each hand as the sun rose red over the horizon past the terrace.

She had to choose.

She'd waited for a long silent moment.

Then exhaled and shaken her head.

Tossed the silent CIA phone onto the couch.

Hit up her tech-wiz, sent over the standard advance payment in anonymous cryptocurrency, got him to jam the Raj Palace cameras for the next twenty-four hours, no questions asked.

And immediately an overwhelming calmness washed over Scarlet, like the decision to proceed blind into the unknown had caused a shift in the cosmos, with events rearranging themselves because of that choice.

Her brain buzzed with new energy, and Scarlet hurried back to her pantry of potions. She ran a well-trimmed fingernail along the neatly labelled bottles, her eyes misting over like she was going into a trance, letting the spirit guide her finger, like a coin that mysteriously moves over a Ouija Board, spelling out the answer one letter at a time.

Then suddenly her fingertip stopped on a bottle, her nail catching on the edge of the label, as if the roulette wheel had stopped its spin, the dice had rolled their number, the Ouija spirit had whispered its word, spelled out its answer one letter at a time.

L.

S.

D.

Scarlet let out a dismissive snort when she read the label.

Concentrated Lysergic Acid Diethylamide.

LSD.

The drug which had fueled the hallucinogenic haze of the hippies in 1960s America.

She was about to sigh and shake it off, go down another path because obviously the spirit guiding her finger was a prankster who couldn't be taken seriously.

But that stubborn fingertip stayed glued to the label, a tingle going through Scarlet when she suddenly remembered that the infamous Acid Tests of the 1960s had been secretly sponsored by the CIA, who were testing the powerful hallucinogenic chemical for use as a psychological weapon, a



tool to induce temporary insanity. It was part of the CIA's secret program called MKULTRA, rumored to include projects as outlandish as attempted mind-control. There were credible rumors that the Agency had considered dosing several high-profile assassination targets with LSD, hoping that the sudden onset of wild hallucinations would result in fatal accidents that could never be traced—especially since it was virtually impossible to detect the miniscule dose of LSD needed to drive a person certifiably psychotic for a solid eight-to-ten hours.

Scarlet's vision had sharpened as she stared at that little bottle marked LSD.

Shit, this just might work, she'd thought.

It was risky and unpredictable, but with the cameras down, Scarlet had some room to maneuver.

Especially if she could get O'Donnell and Wagner out of their room.

She'd considered using the old trick of setting off the hotel's fire alarm, but that was so obvious it would just put Wagner on high alert, erasing any advantage an evacuation might give Scarlet.

But O'Donnell going apeshit on LSD might get them out of that room.

Scarlet had never taken LSD herself, but she was familiar with its reported effects. Within thirty minutes O'Donnell would be crawling up the damn walls, going nuts and probably driving Wagner out of his own mind as he wondered what the hell had just happened, whether O'Donnell was having a psychotic break or was just straight-up possessed by demons.

Shit, this could work out *perfect!*

Not only would O'Donnell be an easier victim, but her tough-guy protector would have his hands full handling a violently-insane partner or prisoner or lover or whatever the hell she was to him.

And with Wagner distracted and compromised, the odds would turn in Scarlet's favor.

It would open up a world of possibilities—especially if O'Donnell's madness took her out into the Mumbai streets.

That was Scarlet's domain.

With Wagner distracted on the crowded Mumbai sidewalks Scarlet might be able to push O'Donnell into traffic, in front of one of those overloaded double-decker buses with squeaky

brakes that never stopped in time. Hell, Scarlet would even be able to use a knife, sweep past them on the street like a ghost, plunge that blade into O'Donnell's lower back, right into the kidney—just like the Delta guys were trained to do. Blades didn't have ballistics, the wounds couldn't be matched to a particular knife with any certainty. It would be plausible enough that Wagner had been ordered to put O'Donnell down and did it just like he'd been trained.

A knife might work great in the hotel too, now that the cameras were off. It would be easy if Wagner were distracted enough and Scarlet got a chance. She could do it in an empty hallway or a crowded lobby—each had its own advantages.

So many possibilities once O'Donnell was out of her mind.

Yes, this just might work, she'd decided feverishly.

Maybe that prankster spirit guiding her finger was onto something.

It was still risky, still unpredictable, still far from certain.

She'd still have to improvise, think fast, act even faster.

But that was the game.

And Scarlet loved the game.

Benson had been right about that one thing, at least.

He'd promised she'd love the game.

Promised that she was born to play it.

Promised that it was all part of a grand plan that nobody really understood until it all unfolded.

And *this* plan had unfolded with startling vividness back at the flat. Scarlet's head had buzzed with this new energy that felt like rebirth, reincarnation, returning to something or someplace or someone. She'd undressed in her sparsely furnished living room, dropping her black linen pajamas to the tiles, slipping the loose black tee shirt off over her head and letting it drop until she was naked in the rising sun, her petite breasts still perky enough that the dark nipples pointed up and out like arrowheads.

She'd scampered to her bedroom like an excited child, yanked open her dresser drawer, snatched up her standard set of black cotton panties and a matching tube-bra that held her small boobs firm against her lithe body.

And as she felt the lining of her panties press tight against her pussy, Scarlet knew exactly where the LSD would go.

It was perfect. The vagina was an excellent entryway to the body, a hungry little mouth that would easily and efficiently

absorb the colorless, odorless, non-staining, non-burning, undetectable dose of LSD needed to send O'Donnell on a one-way trip to hell.

Within minutes Scarlet was dressed and ready, a massive dose tucked away in her pocket in an easy-to-dispense silicone squeeze-tube, a pair of almost-invisible transparent polyurethane gloves snapped on tight.

And now here she was at the Raj Palace Hotel.

Scarlet stepped out of the laundry-room shadows, checked the service-desk computer again, her heart thrumming when she saw that her number had been called.

O'Donnell's clothes were ready for pickup.

Scarlet feverishly checked the lot number, then hurried to where the ready-to-deliver packages of plastic-wrapped clothes were stacked. She quickly found the right package, scanned her surroundings to make sure nobody was watching, then carefully peeled open the edge of the plastic and slipped out O'Donnell's panties.

They were a black cotton blend with a reinforced panty-lining. Perfect, Scarlet thought as she deftly dribbled the liquid LSD lengthwise along the absorbent cotton lining that would

press up against O'Donnell's slit. Scarlet emptied the squeeze tube, watching with a tingle of anticipation as the shiny drops disappeared into the black fabric like depth-charges sinking beneath the dark waves of a night-sea.

O'Donnell would lose her mind within thirty minutes of putting on those panties, Scarlet thought as she re-folded the underwear, slipped them back between the blouse and the bra, sealed the plastic with her gloved fingernail, and placed the package back on the stack.

Then Scarlet slunk away into the shadows, took the service elevator up, got off two floors beneath Wagner's room, then padded up the service stairwell. She took a position at the top of the stairwell, peeked through the small glass window cut into the metal fire-door, scanned the empty carpeted corridor lined with closed room-doors.

Wagner and O'Donnell's room was in plain sight, across the corridor from the stairwell, two doors down.

Almost *too* close. She'd need to be careful.

Scarlet took a long breath, exhaled slow and easy to calm her racing heart. She touched the four-inch killing blade nestled in its resin sheath at the small of her back.

Then she leaned against the wall behind the metal fire-door, her body angled so she could just about see O'Donnell and Wagner's room door, keep an eye out for when the unwitting attendant showed up with the dosed payload.

Now all she had to do was wait.

Wait as time counted itself down to zero.

To that moment when Scarlet would get her first glimpse of the poor doomed girl named India O'Donnell.

That doomed girl whose eyes still felt strangely familiar.

Too damn familiar.

And that sickening sense of familiarity only rose as the cosmic clock ticked silently away in the shadows of Scarlet's mind, and when the hourglass-sand ran out and the heavenly chimes of fate sounded, Scarlet watched that door open down the misty corridors of lost time and realized with heart-stopping certainty that this was *not* her first glimpse of that dark eyed, raven haired, doomed little girl named India.

Because there was no mistaking that dreadful sense of returning.

Returning to something or someplace or *someone*.

Scarlet had seen those eyes before.

Seen them looking up from a tiny round face pressed tight  
against Scarlet's milk-heavy left breast once upon a long time  
ago.

Looking up at Mama, those eyes big and wide and alive.

Big with awe and adoration.

Wide with wonder and expectation.

Alive with anger and accusation.



Indy narrowed her eyes after tipping the hotel attendant who'd showed up with her laundered clothes. She closed the door, then turned quickly to Ice, anger rising up her spine, accusation slipping into her voice. "Do you mind? Those are my freshly laundered clothes. I don't want your grubby fingers all over them."

Ice showed her his middle finger, drawing an exasperated eye-roll from Indy. She tried to snatch the plastic-wrapped bundle back from Ice, but he held it far out of her reach, then turned and strode over to the sideboard above the mini-bar.

"Benson just messaged me," he said, slowly turning the package over in his hands, inspecting it closely like a monkey searching its partner for ticks. "Hotel cameras went dead an hour ago. No indication that we've been blown, but he wants us to get out of here ASAP."

Indy took a huffy breath, pushed it out hard and fast. Her heart was beating as if she'd just gulped down ten cups of coffee. Ice had been somewhat jumpy too, and the tension had been thick enough to stop a damn bulldozer.

Especially since Ice had flipped that switch and gone cold again.

Almost like that hot scene in the shower had never happened.

Like he was second-guessing every damn thing he'd said to her in the steamy seclusion of what now felt like a dream, a memory of some parallel universe, a side dimension they'd stepped into and had stumbled out of.

Or been *pulled* out of.

By that damn phone call.

John fucking Benson.

“All right, so the cameras went down.” Indy’s hands were on her hips, fingers balled into fists, knuckles digging into her sides as she glared at Ice who was still inspecting the plastic wrapping like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

“Can I have my clothes back? If there was a bomb in it, we’d be dead by now. And rudely snatching it out of my hands wouldn’t have saved our lives unless it was a very tiny bomb. Are you even listening to me?”

Indy could feel the tension in her own voice, which was peaked and thin, betraying far more emotion than was

warranted by Ice's mostly reasonable inspection. She hated that he'd switched off again so suddenly, leaving the bathroom to take that phone call almost like he was relieved, like he couldn't *wait* to end the tension that had enveloped them the moment he'd turned off the showers, turned off the scene, turned off *himself*.

Indy's gut had clenched when she'd heard Ice dressing unnecessarily fast outside the bathroom as he spoke to Benson. And then when he'd stuck his head back in through the door just long enough to toss a bathrobe at her before continuing his oh-so-important conversation with Benson, Indy's heart had sunk so low she thought it would slip out of her and circle down the drain with the sad trail of forlorn shampoo-suds. She'd stood there in stunned silence, wet hair flat like seaweed against her cheeks, dripping like a leaky faucet down her back, like she'd been shoved into some surreal middle-ground state of shock and shame, disbelief and dismay, incredulity and indignation.

What the hell had happened?

Sure, she'd made some offhand comment about how much water they were wasting.

Then Ice had turned off the showers.

Then the phone rang.

And then boom, the mood was dead, reality roaring back with that phone call.

Divine intervention?

Cosmic coincidence?

Was it just not meant to be?

Did she even *want* it to be?

What the hell did it even mean to *be*?

Were they together?

Could they ever be together?

Did she even *want* them to be together?

And why did this seem like the most pressing issue when Indy was being framed for treason one moment and marked for death the other!

The questions spun through her mind like sparklers as she watched in building frustration while Ice carefully placed her shrink-wrapped clothes on the wooden sideboard and then unsheathed his vicious-looking knife like he was about to slice and dice her panties into confetti.

“You have got to be kidding,” Indy muttered, pulling the top of her bathrobe tighter around her chest, making sure not to reveal even a hint of her admittedly modest cleavage. She wasn’t sure *why* she was trying to hide anything from him after what they’d just shared—well, *almost* shared. “Don’t you think that’s a bit extreme?”

Ice didn’t reply, instead lightly dragging the edge of his razor-sharp blade over the plastic wrap, slitting it wide open. With the blade’s tip he peeled away the plastic, then slid the knife between each individual garment, raising the neatly folded items one by one and peering into the space between each like he actually expected to find something.

“Satisfied?” Indy let out another heavily sarcastic sigh that was perhaps unwarranted but certainly felt good, like she wanted to poke him, prod him, provoke him into flipping that switch again. It was only when she realized she was doing it that she caught herself and pulled back the sharp mix of emotions that were making everything in her body buzz—and not in the good way. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to put on my thankfully non-lethal clothing.”

Ice glanced up at her. His shades were back on. They annoyed Indy. The joke had run thin. It just made her want to

roll her eyes again, pass some comment about how he wasn't fooling anyone with this untouchable macho frame, remind him of what he'd said in that steam-filled cloud-dream.

What he'd said about fate. About destiny.

About ... love.

Love? Give me a fucking break, Indy thought with sudden ferocity. Every professional interrogator is also a professional liar, a master of manipulation, willing and able to say anything, to do anything, to promise anything.

To get what he wants.

Now Indy's breath caught again when she found her train of thought slam into the conclusion that well, even if all that was lies, it didn't change the underlying truth about what Ice wanted in that steamy bathroom.

He wanted *you*, came the whisper from something wicked inside her, something wistful inside her, something warm inside her, something wonderful inside her.

Stop it, she snarled inwardly. The asshole went cold again after that phone call, like maybe he was embarrassed at what he may or may not have revealed in there.

Maybe he was even embarrassed about what he *wanted* in there.

Maybe he'd snapped out of that state of mind, wanted to erase that from their collective memory, pretend like he was all about the *mission* now.

But that stubbornly warm, obstinately wonderful, wistfully wicked part of her insisted there'd been a crack in his veneer, a peeling of the paint, a sliver of light cutting through his dark shades, enough for Indy to see that she'd gotten to him in there.

Not so cool and untouchable, are you, *Ice*, she wanted to taunt, just to see if she could strip off his irritatingly icy veneer, expose that crack in his armor again, show him that she'd made a mark, scored a hit, touched his heart which perhaps wasn't cold stone after all.

Indy was about to pull the trigger and say all that, but then she abruptly stopped herself, remembering suddenly that she couldn't pull off the taunt earlier in the bathroom either, that the words just wouldn't come out in a teasing tone.

Because something about those words felt too damn serious, too damn real, too damn true.

So Indy gulped back the words before they revealed her own vulnerability. She straightened her shoulders, then strolled over to the sideboard and reached for her clothes.

But Ice smacked the top of her hand with the flat of his blade.

“Ouch.” Indy gasped and scrunched up her face, pulling her hand back and rubbing it where the heavy blade had struck her knuckles. “What the hell, Ice?”

A flash of color darkened Ice’s cheekbones, like maybe he’d smacked her knuckles harder than intended.

But he didn’t apologize.

Didn’t break his frame.

Didn’t stop playing his game.

A game that Indy didn’t feel like playing anymore.

Didn’t care if she won or lost anymore.

“It’s best you lose the clothes, toss them and wear something else,” Ice declared with far more authority than Indy wanted him to have over her clothes. She rubbed her throbbing knuckles as Ice slid the knife into the middle of the garment-stack and quickly separated the layers like an expert



chef. “No explosives or tracking devices, but there’s no easy way to check for poison without access to a lab.”

“*Poison?*” A wide-eyed snort escaped Indy. “You think somebody *poisoned my clothes?* What next, a bewitched apple that turns me into a frog? Oh, wait, *you’d* be the frog in that fairytale.” Indy rolled her eyes because she just couldn’t help herself. “Unless I read it wrong,” she added with a sarcastic shrug. “Lots of that going around today.”

The tiny hairs on the back of Ice’s neck visibly bristled, and his body stiffened as Indy watched him spread out the separated garments. He stayed silent for a long tense moment, using his knife to carefully line up the still-folded garments on the sideboard like soldiers ready for inspection.

Finally he straightened and half-turned in her direction, his face dark with hot color. “You *do* work for the CIA, right?” he snapped. “Do you have any idea what kind of shit your employer has tried in the past? Yes, it is possible that someone poisoned your clothes, O’Donnell. Get real. Your life is in danger, and your sarcasm is making it fucking hard to protect you.”

Indy snorted again, this time in wide-eyed disbelief. “OK, do I need to remind you that not long ago you were tied to the

—”

“To the bathroom fixtures, yes, I get it, congratulations, great fucking work, what a tough move slipping plastic ties around my wrists and ankles while I was almost passed out thanks to some undercooked bacon.”

“Bacon? Huh. Well, speaking of pigs ...” Indy muttered under her breath as electric tension crackled through the air between them.

“Sorry, what was that?” Ice turned directly to face her now, cocked his head, cupped a hand behind his ear with exaggerated lameness. “What did you just call me?”

“You heard me,” Indy muttered again, scowling down into her bathrobe, making a move for her clothes again, then yelping when Ice smacked her hand away once more with the flat of his knife, getting dangerously close to cutting her but clearly not giving a shit because he was *so* confident in his skills and *so* macho and *so* dominant. “Dammit, Ice, you do that again and I swear I will—”

She stopped before completing the threat, before really knowing how she would have finished that sentence. This little scene obviously wasn’t about the damn clothes that might or might not be coated with invisible fairy dust poison, but

although Indy was self-aware enough to understand what was going on, she couldn't rein it in, couldn't pull it back, wanted to smack *his* knuckles, break *his* frame, flip that damn switch just to prove that *she* had power too.

Ice's head cocked a little harder as he turned his hand-cupped ear in her direction and leaned in a bit, like he was earnestly waiting for the rest of her threat. When Indy whooshed out a breath and shook her head and backed up a step as if to say it wasn't worth her time, Ice straightened back up and chuckled coldly.

"Thought so," he grunted. "At least you're smart enough to not double down on insulting the guy who's protecting your ass."

Indy told herself to keep her mouth shut but her tongue kept wagging like it was out of her control, her speech no longer supervised by her brain, most certainly no longer supervised by her common sense.

"OK, you saved my ass at the safe-house, for which I've thanked you multiple times," she snapped back at him. "But the truth is you were also very much saving your *own* damn ass too. And, since at the time you believed I was a traitor and were perhaps expecting to slit my throat and toss me into the

Arabian Sea, I doubt very much that the safety of my delicate ass was front and center in your mind when you wasted those two thugs.”

Ice’s throat moved as he swallowed. He took a step closer, a sideways grin snaking onto his face. “Oh, your ass was very much on my mind, O’Donnell. Front and center. Just like it was back there in the bathroom.” Now the grin broke full, but there was an edge to it, more taunting than teasing, more fierce than flirty. “And, by the way, after getting a good look up close, I wouldn’t describe your butt as *delicate* by any measure.”

Indy gasped, her mouth opening wide, her eyes even wider. It wasn’t clear whether he’d complimented or insulted her—after all, her ass *was* pretty tight from all the squats. But it wasn’t about the words. There was something about Ice’s tone that didn’t sit right with her, almost like he was trying to push her buttons, had maybe recognized that she’d been trying to push *his* buttons by calling him a pig.

Or maybe calling him a pig *had* pushed Ice’s buttons and gotten him riled up and pissed off, Indy thought now as a perverse sense of defiant satisfaction rose up her throat and forced itself out in viciously uttered words that proved without

a doubt she wasn't done playing this game, wasn't going to give it up easy, wasn't concerned about treason-charges or wet-teams because this suddenly seemed like a *way* more important fight to win.

“You really are a pig, aren't you?” she snarled, crossing her arms over her chest and facing him dead on, her fiery challenge losing a bit of steam as Ice chuckled lazily then coolly turned back to her clothes, flicking open the folds of each garment until everything was spread wide on full display, bottoms and top, bra and panties. “OK, we're done here,” she declared hotly when Ice used the blade to flip her panties inside out, crotch-line vulgarly displayed as he leaned in for a close inspection. “Give me those, you sick fuck.”

She managed to snatch her panties off the sideboard, but Ice grabbed her wrist before she could get away. He pressed his thumb down hard on a spot beneath her knuckle, sending a sharp slinter of pain up her entire arm, making her fingers splay out and release their grasp.

“I'm not trying to be funny,” he growled, snatching the panties away from her and backing up three steps. “And I'm sure as hell not trying to suggest anything. Look, if someone

really wanted to layer poison on your clothes, this is how they'd do it.”

“Inside the crotch of my panties?”

Ice shrugged. “I would.”

“Well, I know *you* would,” Indy said with a snort, arguing even though she knew what Ice meant, knew that he was in fact right, that the crotch-liner would be the best spot because it would be pressed against her body, right up against a wet and absorbent entrance, an opening designed for receiving.

“Because you're a—”

“Pig. Right. I heard you the first *three* fucking times you called me that.” Ice twirled her panties around his thick long middle finger, that sideways smile which was part-sneer coming back on his face. “Just remember that this pig is protecting your not-so-delicate ass, all right?”

“By twirling my panties around your middle finger? If you really believed there might be poison on my panties, you're being awfully careless, don't you think?” Indy's eyes brightened, and she gasped and snapped her fingers. “Oh, I get it. You're being my *guinea* pig! Protecting me by testing the invisible poison on yourself. Now all I have to do is wait to

see if you drop dead. Genius. Wow. And so chivalrous. My guinea pig protector.”

Ice bit down hard on his lower lip, shaking his head and taking a heavy step in her direction, his fist closed tight around her panties now, his cheekbones almost steaming from the hot blood rising up his neck to his face, making that thick vein on his temple throb like a snake swallowing a family of guinea pigs one by one, glug-glug-glug, this piggy and that piggy and those piggies and these piggies and—

And Indy stared as Ice took another threatening step in her direction and then stopped abruptly, like it was an act of sheer will that made him pause his advance. She could see his massive chest expand and contract as he took heavy breaths to calm the anger that she'd provoked in him even though it was dumb and childish and unhelpful and maybe even dangerous.

But the danger had been gnawing at Indy all day and most of the night. She was chewed up inside, a total mess in her head and her body, a chaotic bundle of powerful hormones that had been surging through her nonstop.

The hormones of fear and flight.

The hormones of arousal and frustration.

The hormones of anger and fight.

“That’s the fifth damn time you’ve called me a pig,” Ice growled, his left fist clenching his knife by his side, right fist still squeezing the life out of her innocent panties. “I know it’s been a rough day for you. It’s traumatic coming so close to being killed.” He took a slow rumbling breath, like he was trying damn hard to stay cool. “But you’re safe now. You can relax, calm down, and—”

“Calm down?! Oh, because I’m hysterical and out of my mind? Because I’m the only one here who isn’t cool, who isn’t calm, who isn’t behaving like a ... a ...” The words all tumbled out like one continuous extended shriek, but the last word caught in her throat when Ice tossed the knife away like he was afraid he might use it.

He took off his shades and she saw the barely-restrained anger in those burning green eyes, saw the beast which she’d seen in him twice already, the animal which had almost taken what it wanted twice already, would perhaps finish what it started now, finish it for good.

“No,” came the whisper from somewhere deep in Ice’s throat. “You aren’t the only one who’s on edge. You aren’t the only one saying things that shouldn’t be said. But that doesn’t



justify insulting me again and again. I've treated you with respect, and I expect the same in return."

"Respect? You *cannot* be serious!" Indy squealed out her response, almost doubling over as an incredulous gasp exploded from her wide-open mouth. "In the past twenty hours you've thrown me against a wall, forced me to my knees, dragged me across the floor by my hair, held me down and rubbed yourself off on me like a dog in heat, and finally invaded my private space in the shower by smashing through the damn door completely naked with your cock hanging out! And those are all facts, clear as day. You want to talk about respect? How about respecting the damn *facts*?"

Ice's brows knitted as he rubbed his jaw and blinked twice like he was seriously considering challenging those clear and undeniable facts. "Those aren't all facts," he declared with tight-lipped coolness, his eyes narrowing before quickly flicking down and then up. "My cock wasn't *hanging* out. It was sticking straight up. I'd like you to respect *that* fact, Ma'am."

Indy shook her head in disbelief. He was gazing dead-on into her eyes, but she wasn't going to allow him to manipulate her with his on-again-off-again teasing-taunting-flirting-

fighting bullshit. She wasn't going to get played any longer, wasn't going to melt when he turned warm, wasn't going to sulk when he turned cold. He could save those tricks for his next target. She was done.

“The only fact is that you've been in a position of power so long without facing the consequences that you think you can get away with saying anything and doing anything to get what you want,” she hissed. “But all you've proved is that you just want what every power-mad dude with big muscles wants when he thinks he can get away with it. You're just a pervert pretending to be a protector. Now give me my damn panties and do your fucking job.”

Ice stared in silence, a hush falling over the room, like perhaps there'd been just a bit too much venom in Indy's words.

Or maybe just enough truth to make it hurt.

Now the coldness crept back into Ice's eyes. His lips tightened briefly, then curled into that half-sneer. He took a long breath, exhaled slow, then shrugged. “Pervert pretending to be a protector,” he repeated, narrowing his eyes into slits, nodding his head slowly. He took another breath, shrugged once more, then flashed an evil grin at her. “Guilty on all

counts. So let me finish the job of being your perverted guinea pig protector. I'll just run one last test on your panties, then we're good to go."

Ice raised his fisted right hand, uncurled his fingers, let her panties dangle down between them.

Indy stared in shocked silence, a tingle snaking up the insides of her thighs as Ice raised his other hand and stretched her panties wide until they were obscenely open at the crotch.

Then Indy gasped when Ice brought the panties to his face, opened his sneering mouth wide, snaked out his python-thick tongue, and dragged it flat and long up along the entire inner crotch-lining of her panties.

"Tastes good enough to me," he growled, tossing the panties at her and turning away. "Now go get dressed. We leave in ten minutes."

Indy somehow caught the panties before they hit her in the face. Her body was trembling from the bottom up, shuddering from the inside out, burning inside that bathrobe, boiling under her skin.

She could barely contain the potent mix of rage and arousal long enough to blurt out a response. And even that

came out muted, subdued, her entire frame broken by his astounding audacity, his brazen boldness, his perverted punchline.

“Great, now I’ll have to wash them out again,” Indy managed to mutter as she hurriedly gathered her ravaged clothes from the sideboard-display and stormed through the bedroom and stumbled into the bathroom and slammed the broken door hard enough to rattle the fixtures, shake the mirror, shudder the shower-curtain.

Indy tossed the heap of clothes onto the marbled space beside the sink. She trembled with something so visceral that she could barely look at herself for fear of what she’d see in the mirror. She turned on the faucet, ran it hard and hot, took several heaving breaths to bring herself back to earth, back to reality, back from the sickeningly seductive space Ice had dragged her into with that move.

She snatched up her panties, pulled them open to where she could see the diamond-sparkles of Ice’s saliva all along the secret length of the crotch lining. She glanced at the steamy-hot faucet that would wash off his grossness, slough off his saliva, erase his mark.

But then, as the bathroom began to fill with steam once again, the white-hot mist enveloping her in that cocoon, pulling her back to that place where it seemed like *this* was the story, *this* was the mission, *this* was the fight, Indy gazed at herself in the last clear patch of mirror, saw what felt like another woman looking back at her with that wonderful wickedness in her eyes, that wistful warmth in her smile.

She stared as the mirror fogged all the way up, her reflection slowly swallowed by the steam.

Then, barely breathing, Indy turned off the faucet. She undid her bathrobe, stepped into her sticky-shiny panties, pulled them up tight, that shudder going through her again when she felt his wetness press against hers, sensed her little mouth down there open up for a taste, for a sip, for a trip.

A trip down that rabbithole we all know so well.

A trip to that place which could be heaven or hell.

“What the hell was that?” Ice almost punched the damn TV, almost ripped the fucking sideboard from the wall, almost picked up the couch and hurled it through the window. “Are you *insane*? You’re in the middle of a serious-as-death mission involving the top levels of the CIA and you’re playing *this* game instead?”

Ice paced the floor like a caged lion, clenching and releasing his fists just long enough to smack himself repeatedly on the side of his head. He’d been coming unraveled ever since he strode out of that bathroom to answer the damn *phone* instead of finishing what he’d started, finishing what he now knew would *never* be finished.

It was over.

The moment had passed, the fire had changed direction, the flames now turning inwards, turning them against each other because neither of them could face what was said in the steam, what was whispered through the water, what was spoken under the covers of that closed space which felt so far away from the real world that Ice almost wondered if it had really happened.

But of course it had happened. Ice had been in there saying ridiculous things, the kind of crap that Jack bullshitted about all the time when he was gaming one of his party-girls.

Yeah, Jack loved to tell the girls he loved them, would say it with that cocky jackass grin that every girl could see through but somehow still couldn't resist.

But that was Jack. Ice was different. He'd always been different.

Words like *love* were not part of his vocabulary.

Especially not with a woman who made him feel like this.

Vulnerable.

Like he'd been cracked wide open.

Like she'd stripped off his armor and struck a mortal blow.

Infected him with her sweet poison.

Then turned him down.

She had, hadn't she, Ice thought as his cheeks burned with some mix of disappointment and humiliation, all of it combining into a compressed ball of tightness in the pit of his gut. Yeah, he'd been the one talking like a love-sick idiot, trying to get her to say she loved him, pretending it was a

lighthearted game even though his body warned that it wasn't lighthearted and it sure as hell wasn't a game.

Either way, even if it was a game, Ice had lost.

He cursed out loud again, swung his fists as he paced, punching the air like a shadow boxer, his temples throbbing with blood, his cock doing the same in his pants, his heart working overtime to keep everything going at this furious pace.

Ice knew he was burning valuable resources by focusing so much on this crap, on this back-and-forth, this hot-and-cold, this push-and-pull. Deltas were trained to conserve every ounce of energy—especially mental and psychic energy.

Because more missions crashed and burned because of a mental or emotional failure than a physical error.

And it felt like Ice was failing on all counts.

Mental.

Physical.

And most certainly emotional.

Because emotions shouldn't even be a consideration. Ice had spent a decade learning how to manipulate other people's emotions, not lose control of his own.



Especially not like *that*.

He shook his head again at the dumb-ass display with the panties. Then he cursed inwardly once more at the bullshit he'd spouted in the shower. Finished the self-flagellation with a nice dose of regret for losing control and rubbing himself off on her, then kissing her hard and deep, licking her face like a dog, a beast staking its claim.

Yeah, maybe Indy hadn't been that far off.

Ice wouldn't be surprised if the next words in his raging inner monologue were just *oink-oink-oink*.

It took another three lengths of the long living room before Ice found his way back. Well, not all the way back—just close enough to the neighborhood of self-control that he could think again, remind himself that in all the overheated back-and-forth involving name-calling and panty-licking, Indy had been right about one thing:

Ice needed to do his fucking job.

Nothing else mattered if he didn't bring Indy O'Donnell home safe.

Which of course wouldn't happen until Benson said it was safe to bring Indy O'Donnell home at all.

“Kaiser wants you two on a plane back to the States ASAP,” Benson had said earlier on that poorly timed phone call. “But I’m going to stall him.”

Ice had tapped the speakerphone button, turned off the camera, then tossed the phone on the bed as he pulled on his pants—which took some effort because his cock didn’t want to get stuffed back in there. “Why?”

Benson sighed. “Kaiser’s losing his patience with the Rhett Rodgers thing. There’s no concrete evidence other than my hunch, and he refuses to go to Senator Robinson with just that. Says it might backfire, make Kaiser look weak, like he’s trying to throw shade on Rhett’s reputation just to bring down a potential competitor for the Director’s job.”

Ice had grabbed a bathrobe, stuck his head into the bathroom long enough to toss it in there, refusing to glance at Indy because he needed to flip that switch back to the *off* position and keep it off. So he’d tossed the robe in there and then strode back out through the bedroom to the living room, frowning as he parsed Benson’s remarks. “Who’s Rhett Rodgers?”

Benson’s breath had caught abruptly, like he’d slipped up saying the name. “Never mind. It’s irrelevant.”

“Irrelevant my ass,” Ice had snapped, glancing towards the open bedroom door, trying to keep his mind from going back to that bathroom, to that other world which seemed beyond reach right then, perhaps beyond reach forever. “That’s the guy you think set Indy up. The fucker who sent that wet-team to the safe-house. So if you know who he is, just bring me back to the States and I’ll take him out quiet and clean, Benson. End this thing the right way.” He’d paused a beat. “In fact we don’t even need to wait that long. Get Jack on it. My brother’s a loudmouthed jackass most of the time, but when it comes to a clean kill he’s as good as any Delta.”

“Negative. Rhett can’t just disappear—not when Kaiser already knows I suspect the guy.” Benson had sighed into the phone. “Look, things are a bit touchy with Kaiser right now. There’s a lot going on in his life, and I’m worried he might say to hell with it all and just retire.”

Ice had thought a moment, then sighed. “The adoption. Fay’s niece and nephew. I heard about it from Fox. Heard Kaiser’s wife Alice moved back in after leaving him a decade ago.” He took a breath, then shook his head. “Still, there’s no way Kaiser’s done with the job. Because the job isn’t done

with him. I know men like Kaiser. He'll never be able to turn it off, never be able to turn away from this."

Benson grunted. "That's what I'm hoping he'll figure out before it's too late. Either way, right now Kaiser's decided to do this O'Donnell thing by the book. He's worried another wet-team will show up at the hotel and make a mess that can't be cleaned up. The safe-house was one thing—Kaiser got Moses to clean up the bodies, get rid of your truck. But a hotel is a different ball-game. Collateral damage would be unavoidable. Hell, there are guests from a dozen different countries in that hotel. A couple of stray bullets end up in those international guests and we could start the next World War."

Ice had chuckled darkly, peering through the spyhole to check the hallways. "We're all right to hang out in Mumbai as long as you need it, Benson. I got things under control. We'll leave the hotel within the hour, stay under the radar so my alias doesn't show up in any other hotel databases." He'd scanned the hallways, waited until a busboy pushed an empty room-service cart into the service elevator, then turned his attention back to Benson. "But eventually I'm going to have to bring Indy home. I presume civilian flights are off limits—

we'd show up on the flight manifests, and even I can hack into those with a simple download from the dark web. Embassy flights are off-limits too, right? And we've got no military bases here, no C-17 transports that could shuttle us back to Andrews or Robbins worry-free. So what's the plan?"

Benson had hesitated for a disconcertingly long breath. Ice hadn't worked with the man before, but the other Darkwater guys had said Benson was always in control, always one step ahead, always had a plan.

Except Ice wasn't picking any of that up from Benson right now.

Instead he got the distinct sense that Benson was anxious, worried in a way that he couldn't hide.

"You hiding something from me, Benson?" Ice said quietly, a dangerous edge moving through him. Sure, the other guys had made it clear that it was best to go along with Benson's games, to trust the wily old dog.

But Ice wasn't like most of the other Darkwater guys.

Ice was used to running the mind-games himself.

Ice was the guy who extracted secrets from others.

So he didn't respond well to being stonewalled.

“Of course I’m hiding something from you, kid,” Benson said cheerfully, but with an underlying tension that Ice could read clear as a neon sign. “Look, I need a few hours to handle Kaiser, maybe get him something concrete on ...”

Benson trailed off, but Ice jumped on it. “On Rhett Rodgers?” Ice shook his head when he realized Benson was unravelling, that the guy was maybe finally coming undone, that seven years of Darkwater missions might be coming to an end. Well, had to happen soon enough, Ice thought. Everything ends, nothing lasts forever. But Ice wasn’t going to go down with the ship. If the Captain wasn’t steering right, Ice had no problem stepping up and taking over. Some might call it mutiny. To Ice it was just common sense. “Look, Benson. You need to come clean right now or else I’m going to take matters into my own hands. Start talking, or I swear I will call Jack and give him the name Rhett Rodgers.”

“Then Jack will spend the rest of his life in Federal prison. Besides, Jack works for me, not you.” Benson’s tone was cold and commanding, crackling with natural authority. “And you work for me too, last time I checked. But I’ll check again, tough guy. You still want to be a part of Darkwater? Still want to work this mission?” He took a breath now, exhaling with

slow satisfaction, like he already knew Ice's answer to what came next. "Still want to keep Indy safe? It *is* Indy, right? No longer just O'Donnell to you. No longer just a target to you." Another breath, and now Ice could almost hear the grin on Benson's face. "You two were in that steamy bathroom an awfully long time, Ice-man. Hope I gave you two enough time to ... what's the right word ... *connect*."

Ice had gulped back a barrage of obscenities, tried not to crush the phone to powder. But after the surge of anger there came a sinking stab that threatened to stop his heart.

Because Ice had made sure to leave the Darkwater phone outside in the living room before he stormed into the bathroom with all his weapons alert and erect. Benson might have faintly heard him shatter the bathroom door, but after that no voices would have made it through the roar of the shower, no phone-camera could have seen through the thick walls even if it had been pointed that way—which it wasn't.

So if Benson didn't have eyes or ears *inside* that steamy cocoon of theirs, it meant the phone call had truly been bad timing, just a coincidence, Benson's best guess that he'd given them enough time to finish whatever they'd started in there.

Which meant Benson's timing had been off.

A bad sign.

Because what had the other Darkwater guys—and especially their wives—said about the strange coincidences on all those previous missions?

They'd said it felt like there were no such things as coincidences on a Darkwater mission.

That everything either lined up perfectly or just totally fell apart.

Of course, Ice had laughed off that pseudoscientific crap which belonged in the trash along with astrology, palmistry, and the entire grab-bag of New Age nonsense—which he was very familiar with, thanks to Mom and Dad's hippie-hugging ways.

And maybe that's why those woo-woo warnings from the Darkwater wives had stuck with Ice, had triggered something in him, dredging up unsettling memories that he thought were buried for good.

Yeah, that shit about coincidences and timing was the same kind of crap Mom and Dad used to go on about, over and over again like broken records still playing on a lopsided turntable from the drug-filled haze of the 1960s and 70s.



And of course there was that dumb home-grown poem which Jack loved but drove Ice up the damn wall every time his parents recited it like a verse handed down from the heavens:

No such thing as a lucky break.

No such thing as a meaningless mistake.

No such thing as misfortune or luck.

So just follow your heart and you'll never be stuck.

Ice's heart had done a little jump as that rhyme popped back into his head. And now as he paced the room and waited for Indy the rhyme came back like one of those jingles you couldn't shake from your brain.

No such thing as a lucky break.

No such thing as a meaningless mistake.

No such thing as misfortune or luck.

So just follow your heart and you'll never be stuck.

Ice stopped by the living room window, pulling the curtains open and letting in the morning sun. The rhyme danced its way through his head again, and he found himself grinning, felt his heart do that little jump once more, twice

more, three times now, skipping and jumping inside his chest, widening that grin as the sun warmed his face.

Ice wasn't sure why the rhyme he'd always hated didn't annoy the fuck out of him this time around. Maybe it was because of how everything ended with Mom and Dad, those awful last years. Maybe that little rhyme took Ice back to a time when Mom and Dad were happy, healthy, still years away from the downward spiral that had begun when ... when Ice had turned his back on them after that fucked-up Thanksgiving.

“Stop it,” Ice blurted out loud like he'd lost control of his voice, couldn't stop his thoughts from forcing their way out as words. He gulped, clutching the curtains so hard he almost ripped them off the railing as more words exploded from his lips which felt odd and rubbery, like they'd been molded out of clay. “That had nothing to do with it. You had nothing to do with it. Cancer is a physical disease, not an emotional illness. Cancer doesn't originate in the fucking *mind*.”

“What doesn't originate in the where?” came Indy's voice from behind him now. Ice whipped around to see her all dressed up and standing in the bedroom doorway brushing her long raven-dark hair. “And why are you talking to yourself? Is

that what happens with you Delta guys because you spend so much time alone?”

Ice blinked back the burn from his cheeks. She hadn't heard all of that, he told himself with a surge of embarrassment. He tried to force a smile, then realized he was still grinning through those rubbery make-believe lips.

But suddenly the grin faded when he caught his gaze moving down Indy's curves highlighted in the open bedroom door. Now the warmth in his heart turned to a raw heat, and Ice wasn't sure what was going on with him, figured it was because he hadn't slept since his plane landed almost thirty hours ago.

Yeah, that was it, he reasoned. Jet lag plus adrenaline-fallout from the wet-team action plus dehydration from the food poisoning plus the rubbing-post incident plus a whole lot of unfinished business about which his brain and body seemed to be in violent disagreement. Yeah, he was just surging with adrenaline and testosterone and a whole lot of other neurotransmitters and hormones, all of which were combining to make him feel ... weird.

But weird in a way he'd felt before.

Felt once before, many years ago.

The day things changed between him and his parents.

That very same Thanksgiving Day when he'd walked out on them, turned his back in anger, never saw them again until they were dying.

Dying because of him, whispered that darkness which he'd successfully stifled for years but was bubbling up now.

Bubbling up alongside that sickeningly familiar buzzing in his brain, like he was on something, something he recognized from that traumatic Thanksgiving.

That's impossible, he told himself while blinking his gaze away from that mesmerizing V between Indy's hips and forcing a smile, trying hard to look nonchalant as streaks of electric energy sparked his body, now his mind, now his vision, making him blink again and summon every last ounce of willpower to regain his composure and pretend like he hadn't just licked the crotch of her panties like a deranged sex-demon and wanted to do it again, lick what was now pressed tight against the inside of those panties, taste that wetness on his rubbery lips like her nectar would bring him to his senses, put him back in control of whatever the fuck was happening to him.

It was only when Ice managed to focus his vision enough to see Indy's face that he noticed she was still brushing her hair but doing it with a strangely repetitive motion, grinning big and wide as she ran the brush through her long black tresses, grinning almost like she couldn't help it, perhaps didn't even know it.

“Your mood seems to have improved,” Ice said stiffly, a frown suddenly dragging on his face when he remembered what he'd blurted out about cancer and causation before he knew Indy was listening. Shit. Shit. Shit. Don't think about that, Ice. Not when your mind is spinning to someplace that feels way too familiar.

Indy shrugged, her smile instantly fading like she could see the dark emotion in his eyes, see right into him like there was no barrier, no curtain, no veil. “And your mood seems to have worsened. You said something about cancer. Were you thinking about your parents?”

Ice's already stiff body tightened to stone. “No,” he blurted out far too quickly, kicking himself mentally for even opening the door to a conversation about something that did not need to be talked about—not now, not ever, because there was nothing there, because it was all just self-directed blame for not being

able to convince his own parents to get *real* medical help, to get *legal* drugs to ease their pain, to stop kidding themselves about how the universe really worked, to face the facts instead of filling their heads with fiction.

Indy kept brushing her hair with those strange, almost manic, long repetitive strokes. She smiled quizzically at him. “No? That’s your answer? One word? And that too a *lie*?”

Ice gaped like a guppy, tried to refute her accusation but couldn’t do it, like he saw clearly that she’d seen clearly, that she knew without a doubt that he’d been lying, like suddenly there was absolutely no way they could hide a damn thing from each other.

He kept staring, a sense of frenzied motion spinning his head around even though he was strangely stuck in place, frozen in the moment as that rhyme kept playing itself back and forth in his head, speeding up as if that broken record was spinning out of control, faster and faster ...

... and as he watched Indy she kept brushing her hair in long strokes, again and again, now moving faster and faster like she couldn’t stop, couldn’t stop looking at him, looking at him with those big dark eyes, with pupils dilated to the size of saucers, irises pulsing with light that seemed to come out in

beams of kaleidoscope color, spinning round and round like that rhyme, like that time, like that slime, like that mime, like that—

“*Motherfucker!*” Ice roared when he chanced a glance at his liquidy reflection in the window-glass, looked into his own kaleidoscope eyes and saw that his own pupils were dilated to the size of Jupiter’s moons. He shook himself like a flea-ridden dog, blinked about a hundred times as he watched Indy keep brushing her hair while grinning like a madwoman, like a stuck moment endlessly repeating itself. “Indy, I think ... I think ... shit, I think we’ve ... we’ve been dosed.”

Indy suddenly stopped brushing her hair and held up the brush and stared at it like it was alive, a slug-like creature moving in her hand, a slime-mold with long sharp teeth that was about to leap for her throat. She gasped and tossed it towards the couch, her gaze following its trajectory like she was tracing its path perfectly through the air. It landed on the couch cushion and bounced off it onto the carpet. Indy stared at it as if to make sure it was dead. Then she cocked her head at Ice, raising an eyebrow like she’d only just processed what he’d said.

“Dosed? With what?” She looked down at her hands, then held them up and examined them curiously like they were alien flippers. “I swear I can see all the veins and arteries in my hands, Ice. They’re pumping and pulsing, throbbing and twitching, seething inside me, trying to slither out.” She looked up again. “Dosed with what?”

Ice shut his eyes tight, forced himself to find a place of focus from where he could operate. If he was right about what was happening, things were only just getting started. The next eight or ten hours were going to be a bumpy ride, with the insanity peaking at around the four-hour mark. He’d only had one experience with this, but it was burned into his brain, seared into his psyche, carved into his consciousness.

“It must have been an NOC operative,” Ice muttered, furiously rubbing his jaw as he replayed Benson’s warning at the end of the phone call which seemed as hallucinatory and fictional as everything else right now.

Indy’s saucer-wide eyes snapped into paranoia-fueled focus, like she’d suddenly remembered in a rush where they were and who they were and why this was serious as hell, dangerous as sin, deadly as death. “Somebody activated a Non-Official-Cover Operative to come after us?”



Ice shook his head wildly, his thoughts coming too fast to control, too hard to stop from gushing out as garbled words. “Not us. *You*. Benson said it might be Rhett’s next play, that the guy wouldn’t send in a clumsy subcontractor wet-team again, that he’d either just abandon the whole thing or else try to activate an NOC operative in Mumbai, take you out in a way that leaves the door open that ... that *I* might have done it, to make it look like Kaiser told Benson to order me to put you down quietly, cover this whole thing up so it doesn’t make Kaiser look bad in front of Robinson and the Senate Intelligence Committee. Do you follow? Because I can barely hear myself right now. Shit. Shit. *Shit*. This is bad. Really fucking bad.”

Indy’s eyes darted all over the place like twin pinballs, like she could literally *see* the words flying past Ice’s lips. He knew he’d been blabbering at the speed of light, but apparently her mind was amped up to where she could process it at light-speed too.

But although dark recognition flashed in her eyes, all she said was: “Dosed? On what, Ice? What ... what’s happening?”

“LSD,” Ice said, nodding furiously to clear his head even though he knew it was useless, that LSD was a one-way ticket,

that there was no getting off this train because there were no brakes and it was all downhill. “Colorless, tasteless, odorless, undetectable, unpredictable, unstoppable. Nothing to do but ride it through. Trust me, if there was an antidote, some home remedy to make it stop, I’d know it. Shit. Shit. *Shit.*”

“But ... but how did ... how did it get into us ... I don’t ...” Indy trailed off, her cheeks suddenly darkening with color like she’d suddenly understood.

Ice understood too—the first part of it, at least.

He knew how *he’d* been dosed.

But why the hell was *she* tripping like a flower-child from Frisco?

The answer came lickety-split, in a rush of hot recognition, an avalanche of overwhelming arousal that almost brought Ice down cold because the blood left his head so fast.

Somehow he stayed upright, fought his way through the stars spinning his vision into spacey sparklers, realized he was grinning like a moon-eyed wolf.

“You didn’t wash those panties out, did you?” he whispered as that arousal snaked up his throat and forced his thick tongue to slide out past his lips that were feeling real dry

right now. “Oh, you filthy little spy. So I did read you right. I read you right all along.”

Ice took a step towards her even as the last vestiges of his sanity tried to pull him back, tried to remind him there was a CIA assassin somewhere in this building just *waiting* for him to let his guard down, that of all the dumb careless reckless decisions he’d made today this would be by far the worst, that if he didn’t stop himself now there was a very good chance Indy was a dead woman, that if he failed to hold himself back now he’d fail this mission, fail this woman, fail every damn thing he stood for as a man.

But he couldn’t stop the advance. And it was most certainly the *man* in him driving Ice onwards.

Not the beast, not the animal, not the demon.

Well, maybe a *little* of them, Ice acknowledged with a dangerous shrug as he felt the beastly animalistic demonic wolf-grin break so wide his face hurt.

Indy’s face looked to be hurting too, but from mortified horror as she covered her mouth and backed her way wide-eyed into the bedroom.

“I ... I ... of course I washed them out,” she mumbled through her spread-out fingers even as her eyes screamed the truth. “Of course I washed out your grossness from my panties. I can’t believe you’re even *suggesting* that I in any way shape or form would *ever* do something so filthy. You’re sick. Get away from me.”

But Ice stomped forward as Indy scuttled backward, both of them grinning like goons, snickering like schoolkids. She backed into the bedroom, then with a sly shrug and a wicked wink Indy slammed the door shut in his face as her lips mouthed something through the boiling air, words that took their time to make it through the blood-thunder in Ice’s eardrums, words that called out an invitation that Ice felt in every fiber, heard in every heartbeat.

*You know where to find me*, she’d whispered through that wicked wink, giggled through that gargantuan grin, cooed through that crack in the door, that splinter in space, that tear in time.

Ice’s consciousness was running away from him, skyrocketing to some place he didn’t want to accept was real but couldn’t deny existed. His vision was speckled with starlight but somehow clear and crisp like a sunny day in

winter. That whimpering voice of sanity still echoed somewhere in his vibrating skull, but it was being drowned out by this new clarity, this perfect plan, this undeniable event that Ice somehow knew had to happen now, had to happen before anything else could happen, had to happen because it was the only thing that ever fucking happened in the universe, from big bangs to black holes to supernova sunsets to red giants rising.

It was all the same energy, Ice suddenly understood as the chimes of comprehension rang in his ears, the bells of belief trilled in his brain, the sirens of second-sight shrieked in his soul. Shit, it was all the same damn energy, wasn't it?

The energy of creation, the energy of destruction, the energy of sex, the energy of violence.

The energy of love.

Suddenly Ice was laughing, and he swore he could hear Mom and Dad laughing from somewhere behind that veil which was opening up like a stage-curtain to reveal that it was all a play, an act, a game of fate, a dance of destiny. And as Ice heard his own laughter peal through the turgid air along with those bells and chimes and sirens he knew this train had left the station, that he was on it, maybe even driving it, driving it

like a mad clown because the train was out of control, couldn't really be driven but only ridden.

Ice stumbled across the room, kicking his boots off, tearing his shirt off, that closed bedroom door glowing with the energy of her invitation. Somehow he had the presence of mind to make his way to the front door first, peer through the spyhole to make sure it was clear outside before cracking it open and sticking the DO NOT DISTURB sign on it even though the letters looked like hissing hieroglyphics one moment and singing seahorses the next and sounded like bells again, chimes again, sirens shrieking in his skull again, shrieking way too loud to be imagination.

And then Ice realized that maybe the bells and chimes and sirens weren't just in his head.

They were coming from the couch.

He closed one eye and tried to make out what that offensively ostentatious object on the couch might be, and then he felt his energy-balloon pop and his downhill train run out of track and that starlight get sucked down into a black hole of warning.

It was the phone.

John fucking Benson.

Ice froze mid-undress, every muscle tensing up as if the entire universe had frozen along with him, like every moment of every possible past and probable future hinged on the choice staring him in the face, screaming up at him from that phone which was vibrating and throbbing and pulsing like a living breathing seething searching creature of the dark.

The moment stretched out for eternity, and Ice could feel those distant fingers of sanity clawing at him to come back to that place where a candle of common sense still flickered in the storm winds of chaos.

Ice gritted his teeth, tightened his jaw, took a heavy step towards the phone, straining against some unseen force like he was climbing a mountain in the driving snow, the wind trying to push him back down before he got swallowed up by the storm, passed the point of no return, was committed to finding the cloud-obscured summit or be lost forever.

And now Ice had made it to the couch, was staring down at the phone, knew that this wasn't a divine sign but Benson's deliberate attempt to seize control of Ice's runaway train, put things back on track, take over the wheel from that mad clown giggling in Ice's head.

Perhaps Benson had heard all that stuff about dosing and danger, NOC and LSD. Perhaps Benson was doing the right thing by stepping in and taking charge. Perhaps Ice needed to do the right thing by clawing his way towards that flickering candle of common sense, using every last bit of his training to clutch that remnant of reason, to answer that phone and give up control to someone else, someone sober, someone sane.

Ice picked up the ringing phone now, turning it over in his hand as the choice turned over in his mind. He was fully feeling it now, no doubt it was the same pattern which had played out that Thanksgiving Day all those years ago, when Jack was away on his first deployment with the Army, when Ice had come home for a week after his first Delta mission.

After his first kill.

Now a sharp pain splintered through the space behind Ice's left eye. He winced and shook his head to get the memories out of it. But they were all bubbling up now, storming through his head like soldiers in formation, their bootsteps marching out the images of that awful time in Ice's life, their war-drums thundering out the emotions of what Ice had to endure that day because his parents had crossed a line, done something he could never forget, never forgive.



Change direction, he told himself as he felt his energy start to spiral downwards. That fateful Thanksgiving had forced Ice to learn first-hand how this dangerously unpredictable drug worked.

It worked with whatever energy you fed it.

Feed it light and you get angels.

Feed it darkness and you get demons.

And right now Ice could feel the monster gorging itself on darkness, swallowing those angels, fueling those demons.

He stared at the phone in his hand as the dread-beast surged in his heart, those dark memories of being forced to confront his own soul on that Thanksgiving Day when a young Ice Wagner had returned home after taking a human life for the first time, doing something that was profoundly difficult even though it was duty, was deeply unsettling even though it was orders, was tremendously traumatic even though it was absolutely the right thing to do.

Ice was losing it now. He had no idea how long he'd been standing here staring at the ringing screaming vibrating angry phone. He tried to swallow but his tongue was thick like a

potato in his desperately dry mouth. His eyes burned like he'd forgotten how to blink.

But those burning unblinking eyes still had true vision, and Ice realized he was staring at the bedroom door now, that door which was pulsing with energy, glowing with potential, shining with salvation.

That's where you need to be right now, Ice told himself as he felt the angels and demons meet in a deadly embrace on the battleground of his psyche. That's where you'll find the light that powers your angels and destroys your demons.

The certainty blazed through him, electric energy streaking through Ice's body and lighting up the entire grid, sending explosions of color through his consciousness. He had to step through that door, make the choice to follow his heart because it seemed to be pointing the way with breathtaking clarity.

So with that clarity burning through his brain Ice grabbed his heavy knife from where he'd tossed it earlier. He placed the vibrating phone down on the wooden sideboard, holding the squirming thing in place as he took a breath.

Then Ice raised the knife and brought it down hilt-first, striking the metal-knobbed base of the weapon hard into the phone's screen, shattering it into a million pieces.

The phone went silent. The screen a black hole with spiderweb tentacles, like Alice's looking-glass gaping its dark maw and beckoning Ice to step inside, crawl down that rabbithole, tumble all the way down.

Ice turned the shattered phone over, cracked the dented back cover, pulled out the battery and tossed it across the room. Satisfied that it was dead enough, he turned his attention to that glowing pulsing shimmering bedroom door.

He took a breath, was about to barrel himself shoulder-first into the door and shatter his way through that looking glass.

But then he heard something strange from behind that door.

Ice cocked his head, then strode to the door and listened.

"Shit," he muttered when he remembered that although he'd been through this once and at least had a vague idea of what to expect, Indy clearly hadn't been so lucky. Or unlucky. "Shit. Shit. *Shit.*"

LSD was a highly psychoactive drug, opening up parts of the brain and dredging up memories and emotions that might have been repressed for years, decades.

Perhaps even forever.

With a trembling hand Ice tried the doorknob.

It was unlocked.

He turned it softly and pushed the door open gently.

And sure enough, those muffled sounds came through loud and clear now.

Indy was on the bed, but it was clear that the earlier invitation had been retracted.

Because those demons had come for her too.

Her own demons dredged up from her damaged depths.

She looked at him with blood-red eyes, her body fetus-curved on the bed, her face streaked with tears and fears, her lips trembling with trauma and terror.

“I saw her, Ice,” she whispered as he moved silently to the bed and slid onto it beside her like it was natural, obvious, wanted, needed. “I swear I saw her, Ice. It’s not a hallucination but a memory. I know it. I feel it. It’s her. I know it is.”

Indy curled sideways into him. Ice pulled her gently against his body. They fit together in a shockingly perfect way, and Ice felt his energy swirl and settle with breathtakingly controlled power, like suddenly all that raging chaos had found

a channel, found a purpose, found its target, sought out its fate, settled on its destiny.

“Who?” Ice whispered as she whimpered against him like a wounded kitten. “Who did you see?”

Indy gazed up at him through those wide wounded eyes, her lips moving silently before the words finally made their way out.

“My mother,” she whispered. “I saw her like it was happening now, like it had never stopped happening, like it had always been happening and will always happen, again and again like some infinite loop. Oh, Ice, I know I’m under the influence of a drug, but I swear it’s real, I swear *she’s* real. And she’s ... I’m ... oh, Ice, I can’t stand it, I’m going to explode, I’m going to—”

She buried her face into the crook of his neck and sobbed, curling so tight against him her body was like a spiral circle, a seashell shimmering with sadness Ice could feel like spikes against his skin. He stroked her hair carefully, gently, directing all his warmth in her direction, feeling his angels come to the forefront as if Indy’s darkness had brought out Ice’s light, forced him to focus all the masculinity in him to making her feel protected, safe, secure ...

Loved.

“I love you, Indy,” he whispered, not sure if he was saying what she needed to hear or what he needed to say or both or neither. Either way, he’d said it and he knew he meant it, understood that time was just a sleight-of-hand trick, that they were closer in this moment than other couples might be in a hundred years, a hundred lifetimes. “You are loved, Indy. You are important. You matter. You matter to *me*. Do you understand that?”

Indy curled closer to him, burrowing deeper like she wanted to crawl into his body. She raised her head and gazed into his eyes, the confusion and chaos in her expression slowly morphing to calmness and comprehension, like she saw that he meant every word, spoke the truth like it had been delivered from up on high.

She opened her mouth to speak, but her lips were trembling like tiny quakes and fresh tears were streaming down her cheeks like little rivers and she just burrowed back into him, burying her face into the warmth between his neck and the pillow, her body shuddering with sobs that shook Ice’s body like they were connected, like they were the same person.

Ice stroked her hair again, pulled her as close as he dared without smothering her. He wasn't sure if she'd heard what he said or if those hallucinations where she thought she could see her mother were still messing with her head. "It's all right, Indy," he whispered. "Look, you're on a drug that does stuff to the brain. But it's all temporary. It'll wear off and everything will be all right again. We just have to ride it out and things will settle. Hell, in twelve hours we'll probably be laughing about it." He tried to chuckle, but it didn't come out right.

Indy sobbed once more into his neck, then shook her head violently against his shoulder before gazing up into his eyes. "I know we're on a drug," she said with a forced firmness that was almost comical because Ice could see that she was experiencing that rubber-lips syndrome which made her words come out slurry. "I know it causes hallucinations and delusions. But I know what I saw, Ice. It was her. And it was a *memory*. Look, every psychology textbook acknowledges that those earliest memories are locked away inside every person's head. There are entire books written about what's called the *birth trauma*, which is the moment when a newborn is wrenched out of its nice safe womb where it spent nine months cushioned by amniotic fluid and fed through the umbilical cord and experienced complete and absolute safety, its every

need immediately cared for. And when it's pulled out into the air and forced to breathe on its own, that's actually a traumatic event for the newborn. It's branded on every human's psyche at the deepest levels. And that brand is an imprint, a memory—the first memory, the most important memory.”

Ice stared down into Indy's earnestly wide eyes. “So you're saying you remember seeing your mother after just being born? But she died in childbirth. So you ... you remember seeing her ... die? Oh, hell, Indy. Come here.” He kissed her brow with warm sympathy, sighed into her hair, shook his head gently. “Indy, maybe it feels real but isn't. Benson told you that your mother died in childbirth. Hearing that in itself is pretty damn traumatic. That's a heavy burden to carry. You've probably been carrying some kind of guilt for years, ever since he told you about her. Maybe it's just the guilt making you think you remember her.”

Indy shook her head firmly, her face peaked and strained but those eyes ultra-focused, staring a hole into Ice's head. “It's not guilt. Sure, it wasn't exactly uplifting to hear that my mother died bringing me into the world, that in a way I unintentionally might have killed her.” She shook her head again. “But the memory isn't of my mother dying, Ice. In fact I



saw her calm and serene, heard her heart beating strong and hard as I lay against her body, suckling from her breast. Her *left* breast—the memory is that fucking specific.” Indy took a breath, shuddered it out. She rested her head on Ice’s bare chest, stayed silent for a long moment before speaking. “The memory is more emotional than visual, but I see her clearly. She watched me suckle at her nipple, stroked my little head as I drank.” Indy’s breath caught in her throat now, and Ice could tell she was choking back a sob. “My mother watched me suckle, but her eyes were cold, so cold. Oh, Ice, I could hear her heart beat as she watched me. It was slow, steady, calm like she knew exactly what she was going to do.”

Dread rose up Ice’s throat when he saw the darkness flicker behind her eyes. He wasn’t sure where she was going with this, but in a way he already knew, could see the emotional imprint behind Indy’s ultra-focused eyes with pupils big like volleyballs, windows to her soul wide open. “What did she do?” Ice whispered, suddenly understanding that Indy was speaking a truth that had been buried in the earliest folds of her brain. “Tell me, Indy. Let it out.”

Indy blinked twice, swallowed once, then took a breath and nodded. “She watches me drink from her,” Indy said for

the third time, her eyes misting over like she'd been transported back there now, was living it again now, like maybe a part of her had never stopped living it. "She cups the back of my head as I suckle," Indy muttered through trembling lips beneath wide glazed eyes. "Now ... now she's ... she's pushing ... pushing my face into her soft breast, harder now, smushing my nose and mouth against her nipple, pressing down hard, so hard, Ice, oh, I can't breathe now, I'm struggling, clawing at her, squealing, coughing, choking, gasping, but she's still pressing down on the back of my head, and I can hear her heart, Ice, oh, her heart is still beating, it's loud like a drum but still slow and steady, regular and rhythmic as she's doing it, as she's doing *me*, as I'm running out of air, running out of hope, my fingers curling into tiny fists and beating on her to save me, to help me, to ... to love me, to love me, to *love* me ... but she *doesn't* love me, her heart says so with its steady beat, slow and rhythmic, revealing the cold truth with its unchanging drumbeat, staying steady and now changing, changing suddenly, changing only for a moment, the moment when I run out of air, when I go still against her breast, when everything goes dark, goes quiet, goes dead." Indy suddenly raised her head like she'd been yanked up by her hair, startled out of a deep slumber. She stared

unblinkingly at Ice, cold certainty in her dark-moon eyes. “Ice,  
my mother didn’t die in childbirth. *I* did. She killed me, Ice.  
My own mother killed me.”

You killed her, Scarlet told herself with cold certainty as she leaned against the metal stairwell door, her body tight with shock. You smothered her like an unwanted kitten, felt her little fingers claw as she cried, heard her muffled squeals as she died. She's dead, and this is just your own imagination playing tricks, your hormones having their way with your sanity. Menopause followed by high-dose progesterone and estrogen is stirring up old memories, projecting the past onto the present, mixing nightmares with reality.

Scarlet exhaled slow and heavy, ran the back of her hand over her brow, wiped beads of cold sweat that had pricked up like poison from the past. She took another breath to shake off the image of Indy O'Donnell's dark eyes, eyes that still sparked the memory of that infant suckling like a dirty little piglet, those big eyes gazing up at Mama.

The eyes of an infant grow with age but are still windows into the same soul, the same essence, the same person, Scarlet thought feverishly as she fidgeted with her fingers, checking the time again, peering out through the glass-window in the stairwell door, wondering how long it would take for

O'Donnell to lose her mind and hopefully drag Wagner and herself both out of that room, out into the open where Scarlet could finish this mission, get rid of this feeling, then maybe take some time off to get her head right, her hormones right, her heart right before logging back into the NOC system.

Maybe she'd never log back in again, Scarlet thought with a rush of relief, maybe even hope. She could just stay disappeared, fade into the mist, be gone with the wind, just like Benson had quipped when he'd assigned her the codename Scarlet before putting her into the NOC system and then cutting the cord and unleashing her upon America's enemies.

The word *cord* dredged up another sickening memory of that day all those years ago when she'd given birth to that tiny caul-covered child, its body shrouded in that sac like a sign that this girl was special.

Scarlet hunched over and dry-retched as the images came back visceral and vivid, like they were happening now, had never stopped happening, would always be happening in some sick dark corner of the pulsing universe.

Scarlet pressed her forehead to the wall and closed her eyes, fighting back the sick, forcing away the memory. It was

like morning sickness again, like her body had recorded every moment of that singular life-changing pregnancy, held on to every vibration in her womb, every kick, every turn, every cry, every sigh.

Now nameless emotions roared through her body, emotions that Scarlet didn't think she'd experienced the first time around. In fact she remembered being extraordinarily calm at the time, her heart beating slow and rhythmic like she'd been in a trance, deep meditation, in tune with something profound and mysterious, the pull of fate, the push of destiny.

Scarlet groaned and clutched her belly now, pushing her forehead harder into the wall as she was transported back to that time, could see herself spread wide on a plastic sheet on her apartment floor, pushing that slick sausage-like creature out of her body, hoping for one dark moment that the thing would just come out dead, that it would get the message that it wasn't wanted, wasn't meant to be, shouldn't have ever been, would never fucking be.

She almost screamed now, but no sound emerged because her throat was constricted and tight, her eyelids fluttering as that decades-old hatred surged through her veins, pumped

through her arteries. The hatred burned hot now, just like it had back then, back when she'd put together her plan, channeled the rage of rejection into a legal strategy that would give her both revenge and freedom.

But she'd been denied her revenge, denied her freedom, and now the rage burned hotter, white-hot and rancid after three decades of festering inside her, coiled like a serpent in its hole, dark like a dragon in its lair.

Of course, the years had also graced Scarlet with the sickening self-awareness that arrives with age.

She now knew that some of that hatred was directed at herself.

At the woman she used to be.

Smart like a whip, sharp like an arrow.

But still so young, so innocent, so foolish.

So in love.

Or at least what she *thought* was love.

What a silly chicken-brained twit she was back then.

Falling for the oldest trick in the book of man and woman.

Holding on to the innocently dumb hope that a man like that would suddenly come around once he saw the child, saw *his* child, saw *their* child.

If only she'd seen through her own innocent stupidity back then, Scarlet thought as the blood-red hate—at herself and him and Benson and the child—darkened her vision until the stairwell seemed to spin around her. If only she'd ended the pregnancy when it was clear that the asshole didn't want to be a father, didn't want to be a husband, didn't want to be with her.

She should have ignored his sweet words and listened to her sad heart, given voice to her doubts, embraced her insecurities because they were telling the truth, telling her she was just an exotic toy to this man, that he'd tire of her soon enough, that she'd never change him.

But she'd been drunk on love back then, a starry-eyed Indian girl whose work ethic and intelligence had gotten her that American scholarship, gotten her a ticket to the Land of Milk and Honey, the Home of the Free and Brave.

She'd been a virgin when that dashing young Dean had taken an interest in her exotic looks and accented charm. Free and alone so far from the conservative middle-class home on



the outskirts of New Delhi, Scarlet had fallen hard and deep for the man's elegant Southern manners and movie-star good looks, been seduced like a dream by his sweet words and sensual promises.

And then, after the very first time, when he'd made her writhe and moan, whimper and wail, experience things that were so forbidden to a girl from that closed corner of Indian society, Scarlet had understood that *she* was the one changing.

Changing into something Scarlet didn't even know lived inside her.

But lived inside her it did, and what that man did to her in the darkness of the night awakened that feral creature which yearned for freedom from the dark cage of her soul.

A creature that once unleashed could not be put back in its cage.

Especially not after it had been betrayed.

Betrayed in the most primal way possible, the most ancient of double-crosses, the most visceral of deceptions.

A betrayal that still festered.

Humiliation that still burned.

Anger that still raged.

Because the only thing worse than unrequited love was unfulfilled vengeance.

That cowardly bastard took the easy way out.

“You’ll see him in hell when it’s all said and done,” Scarlet whispered under her breath as she struggled to bring herself back into focus. “You’ll get your revenge then.”

Remember that in a way you *did* kill him, Scarlet told herself fiercely as she pushed herself away from the wall and glanced at the time again. You destroyed his career, ruined his reputation, pushed him over the edge like you pulled the trigger yourself.

Of course, Scarlet had ruined her own reputation in the process. The news of the out-of-wedlock pregnancy crossed the oceans and arrived in New Delhi. Scarlet had been promptly disowned by her shocked and humiliated family, sworn off as a casualty of America’s loose morals, branded too tainted to return to the family home, to that conservative corner of traditional India which would label her a harlot, a whore, a walking *yoni* spread wide for all takers.

But her family was just collateral damage. Part of the plan which had come together once Scarlet turned her mind to vengeance. She’d have to pay that price for her revenge, for

her freedom, for her own dark and deranged version of the American dream.

She'd considered quietly aborting the unborn, unwanted, undisclosed child. He'd told her to do it, immediately and without hesitation, that he wasn't cut out to be a father and she sure as hell wasn't fit to be a mother.

"You're not capable of that kind of love," he'd snorted with self-satisfied certainty. "Or of *any* kind of love. Neither am I, and you fucking know it."

She'd stared at him as he tore down everything she thought she'd believed back then. "How ... how can you say that? I love *you*. And you love me too. You said so. A hundred times. I know you weren't lying. I saw it in your eyes. Saw it in your heart! Me getting pregnant is proof that we're meant for each other. It's fate. Destiny. It's ... it's—"

"It's suicide," he'd snapped. "Career suicide for me. And even worse for you. I'll make sure your scholarship is withdrawn if it's the last fucking thing I do before they fire me. You'll have to drop out of law school, your visa will immediately be invalid, and you'll have to blow the rest of your savings on a one-way ticket home." He'd chuckled darkly, his eyes which she'd always thought were honest as the

day, shone with what looked like wicked delight, like he was actually *enjoying* the power he had over her. “Sure, you can sue for child support. But not until the child is actually born and we do a paternity test. Which, by the way, *can* be challenged in court. Especially if you can’t afford a lawyer to contest it. Which you won’t be able to when you’re back in your shithole third-world country. Will your parents even take you back? You said they’re sticklers about this sort of thing.” He’d snorted contemptuously. “Yeah, I can see how it would be awkward to get you married off with a baby bump or a bastard half-breed kid in tow. This kid fucks up your life way worse than mine. So grow the hell up and get the abortion.”

Scarlet’s heart had sunk so low she’d almost crumpled to the floor. She’d stared unblinkingly into his eyes as the dark humiliation sunk into her shrinking soul. In a withering, whimpering voice she’d tried to convince him to give the child a chance, to give himself a chance, to give them both a chance.

But her heart already knew that she’d lost him.

That she’d never really had him.

That for all her intelligence she’d been played like an instrument, spun like a top, dumped like a truck.

That devastating moment had wounded her in a way that would never heal. But there was something good that came out of it. The lying cheating asshole was right about one thing.

She would never again be capable of love.

Not that kind of love.

Not any kind of love.

And the moment she'd decided that, the wound in Scarlet's heart began to scab over—not healing but simply festering beneath the scab, the dark emotion sparking thoughts that sent her tumbling down a different path, unwittingly at first but then intentional as that humiliation festered into something savage and primal, something born from that deeply sensual place which he'd first awakened in her with his touch, then twisted with his treachery.

The plan had swept into her mind fully-formed, like a gift from some dark power. She'd almost blacked out as the thoughts rushed through her shellshocked brain sharpened by law school.

And then she'd nodded dumbly to him, whispered something about how he was right, how an abortion was the right move, the best move, the only move.

She'd gone underground after that, losing herself in her work, studying the law, reading old cases, plotting her own story. She'd always been a petite woman, and she'd often dressed in traditional Indian loose-flowing *salwar* tunics that would hide her baby bump well enough for the first few months. She told him it was done, that the mistake had been erased, that they could go back to how it was.

A part of her still clung to that innocence, still wondered if maybe she could keep it from him long enough to give birth, that maybe seeing his child would spark some instinct that all humans must have.

Even though Scarlet was herself coming to the dark realization that maybe not *all* humans harbored that instinct to create new life.

Because Scarlet's thoughts seemed to be turning more and more towards creation's polar opposite.

Destruction.

Like the sexual energy he'd awakened in her had twisted into its opposite, a dark transmutation that rippled through every cell in Scarlet's body, giving expression to new combinations of genes, awakening new potentials, a new fate, a different destiny.

Turning creation into destruction.

Compassion into coldness.

Sex into violence.

And indeed, when it came time to go public with her hidden pregnancy, bring it all crashing down on his career, forsaking her own family, Scarlet had felt a rush of exhilaration that surpassed anything that bastard had made her feel with his whispered words and tempting touch.

In fact Scarlet had been flooded with relief when her parents cut her off, cut that cord, set her free from the constraints of those society-imposed morals, liberated Scarlet to give herself completely to the transformation that was taking place. In a way she'd always known that she was never going home, that America was her country now, that although she'd never stepped foot in the United States before Law School, arriving there was like coming home, like she was destined to serve her adopted homeland with this transmuted energy.

Funny how things play out, Scarlet thought now as her mind clawed its way back to that place of cold control. Thirty years and she was still serving her adopted country, the Land of Milk and Honey, the Home of the Free and Brave. So

maybe things were indeed scripted in the stars, written on the pages of fate, engraved in the scrolls of destiny.

But fate wasn't perfect, Scarlet reminded herself as she checked the time once more, sighing because it was still early, forcing her to wait alone with her demons—which were coming alive more often these days, seemed to be on high alert right now. No, fate didn't play out perfectly. If it did, Scarlet would have gotten all the way through her plan all those years ago, tied the whole thing off with a bloody bow, sealed his fate and her own fate with an endgame that would have made her a legal star, a dark heroine using the very system that had oppressed women for centuries to cover up her crime.

She had every detail of her case worked out, would use every loophole in the law, exploit every emotion in the playbook to get away with her revenge in plain sight.

If only that coyote John Benson hadn't been watching.

Watching her transformation from the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike, playing a trickster game she was only starting to understand was even possible, a game that she would one day learn how to play with the same mastery, the same malevolence, the same magic.



“Get your head back in the game,” Scarlet muttered as she trembled again from the sickening certainty that she’d seen Indy O’Donnell’s eyes before, seen them looking up from her own left breast, could still feel her doomed daughter’s gummy lips biting down with futile fury as Mama forced the breath out of the infant’s little lungs until her tiny body went still, one last sigh signaling that its unwanted spirit had flown back to wherever it was souls came from.

Scarlet felt herself falling back into that vicious spiral of memories that she’d successfully buried for decades but were bubbling up like that scab could no longer hide what festered within. She bit down on her lip, shaking her head and wondering if this was the end of the road, if she should just turn around and disappear into the night, fade away into the darkness, let herself be swept away by the waves of time.

Was it time to cut the cord and turn away?

And as if the universe was answering *no*, Scarlet heard a door open out in the hallway.

Immediately she went rigid with focus. A cautious glance through the looking-glass made her stiffen more.

“What the hell?” she murmured, blinking and frowning at the sight of Ice Wagner angling his shirtless torso around the

cracked-open door, looking left and right with electric efficiency, his eyes wide and wired, pupils dilated big enough Scarlet could have driven a truck through them. “No way. How the hell did *he* get dosed?”

A sinking chill passed through Scarlet. Shit. Did Wagner anticipate that someone might poison O’Donnell’s clothes? Did he check them himself and get some of the LSD on his fingers?

No, came the answer as the chill ran its course down her spine and then rippled back up, carrying with it a hopeful tingle. No way the LSD could have gotten into Wagner just from his fingertips. Not unless his fingertips were wet to begin with—and even then Wagner would have needed to suck on his fingers to get enough of a dose.

But Wagner was clearly dosed, no doubt about those dilated pupils, that wired energy.

Which meant the inside of O’Donnell’s panties had somehow touched Wagner’s lips.

The thought sent a shiver through Scarlet. She had no idea what the story was with Wagner and O’Donnell, but the evidence was starting to point to something very intimate.

And gave her a bit more hope.

Hope that perhaps they'd *both* been dosed!

That they were *both* on that crazy-train heading downhill to the lunatic-circus!

Scarlet smiled behind the stairwell-door, kept watching as Wagner did another wide-eyed sweep of the empty hallway before clumsily sticking a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door handle and then slamming the room-door shut.

Scarlet immediately cracked open the stairwell door, cocked her head, listened for the sound of Wagner sliding the deadbolt across.

It didn't come.

No deadbolt.

He was already getting sloppy.

Scarlet's mind furiously recalculated her plan, knowing that if Wagner himself was compromised, her own job became considerably easier. She patted her left breast pocket, feeling the hard plastic of the master keycard she'd snagged from an unattended service cart down near the laundry area. She'd taken it as a precaution, in case things got messy and she needed quick access to an empty room. But now it seemed like

providence, like maybe she could risk entering the lion's den, take the chance that Wagner was far enough down the LSD rabbit hole that everything looked like Wonderland to him, that it didn't matter if he saw her because she might as well be the Mad Hatter.

Or the Red Queen.

Exhilaration rushed through Scarlet again. Things were lining up in that cosmic way, like they had on so many missions over the years—to the point where Scarlet had wondered if she had a guardian angel clearing her path or a protector demon watching her back.

The exhilaration peaked and overflowed into steady confidence as Scarlet smiled at the memory of how she'd let the spirit guide her fingertip along the rack of poisons and potions. And although logic dictated that LSD was too risky and unpredictable, Scarlet had gone with it anyway, trusting that intuition like a witch trusts her spells.

And now, through mechanisms Scarlet didn't fully understand but recognized as the serendipity that had forged her path for decades, she had a chance to do this cleaner than she could have ever hoped. Without the deadbolt she might be able to sneak into that room undetected. At the very least she

could crack the door and get a lay of the land, see if fate had indeed cleared her path all the way to the end.

So with a quick scan of the empty hallway Scarlet strode out from behind the stairwell door. She walked past Wagner's room with professional briskness, using her peripheral vision to check if the spyhole was darkened by someone peering out from inside.

All clear.

Scarlet turned on her heel and hurried back to the door. Then in one swift movement she slid her keycard out, pressed it against the electronic reader, held her breath as it beeped green and clicked open.

She waited a breath, listening for movement on the other side of the door. Nothing, so Scarlet pressed down on the brass doorhandle and gently pushed the door open a crack.

The fresh scent of shampooed hair and soaped skin came through to Scarlet, along with muffled voices from deep inside the suite. Scarlet cracked the door open a little more, peered inside cautiously. She was prepared to react quickly with an apology and an explanation if she got made. It would be easy enough to explain she'd made a mistake, had been informed

that this room had just been vacated and needed to be checked before sending the cleaners in.

But the living room was empty. The muffled voices were coming from behind the closed bedroom door. No change in tone or velocity at Scarlet's entrance.

She hadn't been made.

She was still a ghost.

Scarlet stepped all the way inside now. She closed the door soundlessly, stood stock-still and scanned her surroundings.

Immediately she saw the remains of a shattered cell phone, along with an unsheathed military-style K-Bar knife whose steel-knobbed hilt might have been the murder weapon used on that poor phone.

Scarlet's brows twitched. What had happened in here? Was it good or bad that one of them—probably Wagner—had smashed a phone? Were they on the run from the CIA or some other agency? Was the broken phone Wagner's attempt to destroy any tracking devices? If so, why?

Shooting a quick glance at the bedroom door, Scarlet examined the broken phone. Black and unbranded, it looked

suspiciously like something CIA might issue an off-the-books operative.

And since O'Donnell was very much *on* the CIA books, it meant Wagner was working for the spooks.

He wouldn't be an NOC asset—you couldn't really put a former Delta guy into that sort of deep cover. He was already in the Department of Defense system and besides, those Special Forces guys were too obviously ex-military—a cover wouldn't fool anyone. Which meant Wagner was part of a black-ops outfit. Probably a private military contractor. There were so many of those popping up, now that both DOD and CIA liked to outsource their dirty work. It also gave them ready-made *plausible deniability*, that nifty little term coined back in 1948, after the end of World War II, when the Cold War was just warming up.

Scarlet left the broken phone where it was, glanced at the knife, then decided she was better off using her own blade when the time came. It was difficult to match knife-wounds to a specific blade, and it was by no means definitive like a ballistics-match on a bullet. Besides, Scarlet wasn't going to be able to use the knife so long as they were both in that bedroom together. The blade would only work in a reasonably

open space, where Scarlet could brush past and do the deed relatively undetected with a quick exit.

Sure, Wagner would almost certainly not be at his Delta-warrior best right now, but she wasn't storming in there armed with nothing but a knife—no matter how off his rocker the guy might be.

So Scarlet turned her attention to figuring that part out: How far gone were those two?

After all, there was no telling how a psychotropic drug like LSD would manifest itself.

It all depended on what raw materials the drug had to work with.

What demons lived inside Wagner and O'Donnell?

And how soon would they claw their way out?

Now a muffled sob came through from the other side of that bedroom door. Scarlet frowned and crept closer to listen, that earlier curiosity bubbling up again. She generally avoided getting to know her targets any more than was necessary to make the kill, but this mission still felt a bit too close to home for Scarlet to resist. Yes, she'd managed to stifle that



completely impossible thought of who O'Donnell really was, but the aftereffects still lingered.

She crept past the sofa, was almost to the bedroom door when she noticed a black duffel bag off to the side. It was packed and ready, like maybe they'd been preparing to leave the room, disappear without checking out to slow down anyone who might be tracking their movements via Wagner's alias.

Scarlet crouched down beside the duffel, unzipped it slow and silent, pulled open the top, peered inside. It was Wagner's stuff—folded black tee shirts and black boxer-briefs and black combat-pants and black socks. Dude took the whole “black ops” thing way too literally.

Scarlet quickly checked the side compartments of the duffel, her attention pulling towards the bedroom door. She wanted to listen, hear what was going on inside, get a feel for when she'd have a chance to do something.

It wouldn't be easy in the room. She had to leave Wagner alive, which limited her options because she didn't have the physical skills to overpower the guy. As fortuitous as it seemed to get access to their room undetected, Scarlet knew she might need to reassess, learn what she could about their

state of mind, then backtrack and wait it out. The LSD wouldn't even hit its peak for another couple of hours. There was a long way to go. No need to rush it.

The duffel's side pockets yielded a roll of duct-tape, sticks of spearmint chewing gum, and not much else. But just as she was about to zip the bag closed and move to the bedroom door, Scarlet felt something hard and metallic along the duffel's side, stuffed within the bag's synthetic lining.

A secret compartment. Scarlet's heart quickened. She slid her gloved fingers along the lining, found the recessed zip, slid it open, reached inside.

And pulled out a dismantled Sig Sauer 9mm handgun.

With feverish excitement Scarlet inspected the components, then silently put the gun together. Wagner must have broken down the weapon and hidden it to get past the hotel's X-Ray machine. The secret compartment must be lined with X-Ray-blocking fabric.

Scarlet stared at the gun, blinking as her mind raced. This was an older model Sig, probably sourced locally. But why was it still in its hiding place? Surely Wagner would have kept it on him.

Must be a spare, or maybe they ran into some trouble earlier and took it off someone, Scarlet reasoned. Besides, O'Donnell might also have a CIA-issued weapon on her. Either way, it was almost certain there was at least one handgun in that bedroom with Wagner and O'Donnell.

Still, Scarlet now had a gun that had been in Wagner's possession. She could use it on O'Donnell, leave it here for Wagner to deal with. Didn't matter if he wiped it down or got rid of it—the weapon had no connection to Scarlet, and Wagner couldn't use it to prove his innocence.

Enough for plausible deniability.

Scarlet chambered a bullet, her heart pounding as she crept to the bedroom door. She crouched down low, leaned close to listen so she could figure out where Wagner and O'Donnell might be positioned.

It sounded like they were close to each other, probably on the bed in the center of the room. They were talking softly, their voices carrying an intensity that made Scarlet's ears prick up.

She took a breath, preparing herself for action. With the advantage of surprise combined with Wagner's compromised state, Scarlet knew she could put two bullets lightning-quick

into O'Donnell's chest, perhaps even get a clean head-shot. Then Scarlet would turn the gun on Wagner before he got a chance to draw. She had to gamble that he wasn't suicidal, wouldn't force Scarlet to blow him away too and screw up her crime scene.

Then she remembered Wagner was messed up on LSD too right now.

Could Scarlet reliably expect the guy to be rational?

The consideration made her hesitate.

And in that moment of hesitation Scarlet heard O'Donnell sob out a statement, whimper out some words.

Words that almost stopped Scarlet's heart.

*I see her*, came O'Donnell's voice from the other side of that door, perhaps the other side of time. *I see my mother. She's looking down at me as I suckle on her left breast. Now she's cupping the back of my head, pressing my face into her breast, and ... and ... and she's ... oh, Ice, she's ...*

Scarlet dropped the gun onto the carpeted floor as the words hammered into her like bullets.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't feel, couldn't see.

But she could still hear.

Still hear those words that couldn't be real, had to be a dream, an auditory hallucination, like maybe Scarlet had gotten some of that drug into her own brain, was tumbling down that dark rabbit hole herself, the demons dragging her down to Wonderland, their claws smothering her, their wings suffocating her.

She was down on her knees now, gasping breathlessly for oxygen, clawing at the carpet for the gun she'd dropped. This is a trick, she told herself as the panic threatened to overwhelm her. This is Benson fucking with your head.

Yes, that's it.

Benson.

It *has* to be Benson.

Because he's the only other person in the world who knows those details.

Now Scarlet managed to get a breath, then another. Her vision slowly came back. Her head still spun with dizzy disbelief, and Scarlet tried to convince herself she'd been hearing things, that it was just her own thoughts echoing in her head, masquerading as sound.

But it was wishful thinking.

Scarlet knew what she'd heard.

It can't be, she told herself. It simply *cannot* be.

This is Benson's idea of a sick joke, a farewell mind-fuck before he takes you out, Scarlet told herself again with forced firmness. He's the one who activated you. He's the one who engineered the complexity of having to leave Wagner alive, forcing you to get close to them—close enough so O'Donnell could read from Benson's script, scramble Scarlet's signals before they put her down.

Scarlet rubbed her eyes, shaking her head to make sense of it.

Of course, she couldn't make sense of it. It was too much of a stretch, even for a maverick madman like Benson—who wasn't even CIA anymore.

And even if Benson had engineered her activation, no way could he have predicted the LSD. No way could Wagner and O'Donnell be sober enough to follow some script that Benson had given them. No way could Wagner and O'Donnell know Scarlet was in the room eavesdropping. No way could O'Donnell be *that* good an actress to fake sobs and whimpers while tripping her ass off.

But at the same time, no way O'Donnell could know those details without Benson telling her.

Unless it was a memory.

Now Scarlet's mind started to spin again. LSD was a psychoactive drug, which meant it lit up the brain in unpredictable ways, firing neurons that might not have been activated in decades, surfacing memories buried so deep they may *never* have been conscious.

And the dates lined up too.

Scarlet had seen Indy O'Donnell's file.

Seen Indy O'Donnell's birthdate.

Files could be faked, of course. But Scarlet had seen O'Donnell in the flesh. She looked about twenty-nine or thirty.

It lined up.

It was possible.

And given the alternative explanation of Benson somehow engineering events that couldn't be predicted, couldn't be controlled, couldn't even be *conceived* ... shit, this was actually the *least* crazy explanation!

“But she died,” Scarlet muttered, staring absentmindedly at the gun hanging limply in her left hand. “She stopped breathing, went still against my breast, didn’t stir when Benson busted in. She died. I ... I killed her. Didn’t I?”

The spins came rushing back. Scarlet’s vision veered towards blackness again. She tried to recall the sequence of events that day thirty years ago, but it was all a jumble after Benson had busted into her apartment. She’d been exhausted after giving birth, in a state of surreal shock after smothering her newborn daughter, had no idea what was happening when that wolf-eyed man entered the room like some wizard from another dimension.

“You need to get out of here,” Scarlet mumbled out loud just to keep a grip on reality. She was still on her knees, and she stayed down and caught her breath, scanning the room for the front door, her vision going in and out, disbelief still swirling through the shock of what she’d heard. “Maybe you did get some of the drug into your system. Maybe you are hearing things. Or maybe this really is a setup, some twisted plot conceived by Benson, a level of manic manipulation that’s beyond even your comprehension. Either way, nobody’s seen you yet. You can still walk away. Just get to the door, leave the



room, disappear forever. It's easy. You've planned for this. You've always known that one day you'll need to exit the game, disappear into the same shadows where you've lived for thirty years. It's over, Scarlet. You're free. Nobody knows you're here. That technical glitch in the NOC system cut you off from whoever activated you. You've been set free by circumstance, liberated by dumb luck. Maybe this is fate's way of saying farewell. Destiny waving goodbye. Maybe it is all scripted and your role is done. Exit stage left, Scarlet. Move."

Her gaze settled on the front door. It came into sharp focus. Scarlet sighed, then forced herself upright. A flicker of relief passed through her. She still couldn't understand what she'd just heard, couldn't allow herself to believe it.

She took an unsteady step towards the exit, then another, her grip on reality strengthening as she moved away from that bedroom which might well be a cosmic window into her own madness.

By the time she reached the front door Scarlet decided that although she'd heard O'Donnell's words clearly enough, it was entirely plausible that O'Donnell was describing something else—a movie, a novel, even a memory that was close enough to that pivotal event thirty years ago that it

triggered Scarlet's emotions, fooled her own brain into filling in false details, making a connection that wasn't there, seeing meaning in the meaningless.

Relief trickled into her system as Scarlet got to the door. She exhaled and shook her head, feeling the sweat ooze from her pores like a fever had just broken.

An exhausted smile curled her lips. Only in a fever-dream could she convince herself that this whole thing had been engineered. It was absurd. Benson was history, gone with the wind just like Scarlet would be the moment she opened the door and stepped through it.

She huffed out another breath, was about to pull open the door when she realized Wagner's spare gun was still in her hand.

Shit.

Now *she* was getting sloppy.

She'd better dismantle it again and slide it back into those hidden compartments. She'd probably be fine just leaving it on the damn table, but it was best to exit clean.

Scarlet hurried to the duffel, got down on a knee, was about to break down the weapon when suddenly Wagner's

voice came through the closed bedroom door—far too close for comfort.

“Can’t remember if I slid the deadbolt across the front door when I opened it to stick that DO NOT DISTURB sign outside,” he was saying to O’Donnell. “Be right back.”

Scarlet froze, her eyes snapping wide open, adrenaline roaring back through her sweat-soaked body. She considered bolting to the front door, getting out before Wagner saw her. She was quick, and Wagner might not trust his own eyes even if he did catch a glimpse of her from behind as she left.

She leapt to her feet, the gun still in her hand. She whipped her body around towards the front door, then heard the bedroom door fly open behind her.

Scarlet spun around, raised the gun, aimed it dead center at the heavily muscled shirtless man standing in the doorway, his green eyes wide like flying saucers.

“Don’t move!” Scarlet pointed the gun squarely at Wagner’s chest, locked her gaze on his eyes to make sure he got the message that this wasn’t an optical illusion. “This is real, Wagner. Do what I say and you live. Hands behind your head. Now, please.”

Wagner stopped dead in the doorway, cocking his head and squinting as if he was seriously considering the possibility that Scarlet was a hologram. He took a breath, then exhaled with a coolness that rippled through his ridged body in a way that unsettled Scarlet.

Because it told her this guy might be out of his mind, but he wasn't out of control.

“Shoot.” Wagner's voice cut through the air like cold steel. “Shoot now.”

Scarlet blinked twice, shook her head, not sure if he was suicidal or if he'd already guessed she was an NOC asset with instructions not to kill Wagner.

“Hands behind your head, Wagner.” Scarlet barked out the order again, feeling a sickening dread build in her chest, like her instincts were saying something was wrong, something was off, something was coming. “Damn it, Wagner, do it now or I'll shoot.”

“Shoot,” said Wagner again, his eyes narrowing even though his pupils stayed dilated from the drug. “Do it now. Pull the fucking trigger.”

Scarlet frowned, shook her head, was about to repeat her command, but the words stuck in her throat when Wagner suddenly dropped to the floor and went down flat.

And then Scarlet realized Wagner hadn't been talking to her.

“Shoot, Indy!” he roared from the carpet. “Now, damn it! Shoot!”

Scarlet's eyes went wide as the crash of a gunshot sounded from beyond the open bedroom door.

The bullet smashed into Scarlet's chest, sending her flying backwards into the living room.

Scarlet choked out a bloody scream as the bullet burned its way through the flesh of her left breast, ripping into her left lung, sending her gasping and sputtering to the carpet.

Scarlet's vision went in and out as she drew loud wheezing blood-wet breaths. She knew she was dying, drowning in her own blood, that although the bullet had missed her heart she was done for.

“Ice, it's ... it's her,” came a woman's voice through Scarlet's blood-red dreamscape. “I swear it's her, Ice. It's the woman I saw in my memory. It's ... it's her, I know it. How ...

how is that possible, Ice? Can the drug do that to my brain? It looks so real, like it's really her."

Scarlet's lips moved soundlessly as she looked up through fluttering eyelids.

It's me, she tried to say. It's me. But how can it be you? How can you be here in hell? Because this is hell, isn't it? That's the only place that'll take me.

Scarlet exhaled, waited for the darkness of hell to consume her, take her soul back to where it had been forged in those unholy furnaces.

But as she faded away there came voices from above her, from around her, from all over her, holding her back from that abyss, peering over the edge of that bottomless pit between this world and the next.

"Get away from her," came Wagner's voice. "Don't touch her, Indy. She's still alive. She can still hurt you. Move aside, Indy. Damn it, I said get—"

"Let go of me, Ice," came her daughter's voice, a voice Scarlet had never heard before today but knew like she knew her own eternal soul. "I have to go to her. I don't know what's happening, don't know if this is a dream or madness or the

drug. But it feels so fucking real, Ice. Let me go to her, please, Ice. Please.”

Scarlet stared up through dimming eyes as her daughter’s face flickered into focus. There was no question it was her, no doubt it was her, no possibility it was anyone but her, no chance it could play out anyway but this.

Her daughter moved close, and now Scarlet looked down towards her own left breast, saw the child snuggle up against the blood-soaked cloth, felt the darkness of hell give way to the sunshine of heaven.

And suddenly Scarlet was talking.

Words tumbling out of her with frantic urgency, names and dates and locations, emotions and feelings and impressions, all of it pouring from the open wounds in her heart, words describing sadness and sorrow, humiliation and heartbreak, vengeance and venom, anger and hatred.

“But not for you,” Scarlet heard herself say as her wide-eyed daughter looked up at her with those big earnest eyes, wide-open windows leading directly to her LSD-unlocked soul. “You were just the symbol of my own shame, my own humiliation, my own stupid innocence, my own hot hatred. It wasn’t you.”

“I know,” came her daughter’s oddly cold whisper from near Scarlet’s left breast. “I see it in you. It’s all right. Now hold on, we’ll get help. It’s all right, you’re going to be all right.”

“Yes, I’m going to be all right.” Scarlet forced a bloody smile and shook her head, knowing that nobody was coming to help her, that she didn’t need any help, that her role was done and this was her exit, her ending, her fate, her destiny.

And as her wheezing breaths began to slow Scarlet felt that scab in her heart fall away, releasing that long-festering emotion into the ether, spinning that sickness off into the darkness where it belonged, sending Scarlet where she belonged, heaven or hell or someplace in between or someplace far beyond.

Either way, it seemed peaceful.

Scarlet’s eyes rolled up in her head as her spirit tried to leave the flesh, but it wouldn’t go, couldn’t go, was somehow held back, paralyzed by a burning need to see something in her daughter’s eyes.

Scarlet tried to interpret what she yearned to see in her daughter’s dark gaze, in that saucer-sized stare.



Was it recognition?

Was it acceptance?

Or was it something that Scarlet suddenly craved from the depths of her twisted soul.

Forgiveness.

“Ask for forgiveness, not permission. Isn’t that the saying?” Benson flashed his trademark grin in Kaiser’s direction. “Now you know the story with Rhett. I’ve come clean with you. So just trust me and follow my lead so we can close this out the right way. The Darkwater way.”

Kaiser didn’t move from where he sat behind his desk. His eyes narrowed briefly, eyebrows twitching with suspicion. “You’re a piece of fucking work, John. How can I believe a damn word you say anymore? I’m not even sure I can tell when you’re lying these days. Maybe it’s because you’re so convinced that you’re always right, always justified, always in control. Except you’re not. Senator Robinson is right. You’re off your rocker, and I’ve let our friendship cloud my judgment.”

“Glad to hear we’re still friends.” Benson managed to keep grinning, forced a wink that he hoped looked nonchalant enough. But he damn well knew with sickening certainty that those choices he’d made thirty years ago were drawing the players together now, the power of their emotional connections reaching across space and time, arranging events and accidents

as that vortex of energy began to spin harder, faster, deeper, darker.

Of course, thirty years ago Benson was still an amateur when it came to playing the great game. Looking back now it was clear that he'd been setting the board without really understanding the consequences, without really acknowledging his own hand in how it would play out, without really accepting his own responsibility for those questionable choices he'd made with that innocent infant, that dark-eyed girl who should have died twice but somehow did not, like her spirit kept clinging to the flesh, simply would not let go.

Kaiser groaned softly, took a noisy breath, let it out while shaking his head. He'd been shaking his head for about twenty minutes now, mostly in stunned disbelief as Benson came clean about what he'd done thirty years ago to bring Rhett Rodgers into the CIA, deploy him into the shadows of the NOC program.

Only to watch Rhett emerge from those very same shadows like a bad dream, a fucking nightmare, fate playing out in a way Benson very much did *not* anticipate, destiny delivering a twist that Benson knew could very well bring

down not just Darkwater but Martin Kaiser too, potentially putting a snake like Rhett Rodgers in charge of the world's most powerful intelligence agency.

It was all spinning badly out of control, Benson thought grimly as he waited for Kaiser to respond. Diego Vargas was still out there. Rhett Rodgers was almost untouchable without any evidence linking him to the O'Donnell setup. Nancy Sullivan had cut ties with Benson and Darkwater. And it looked dangerously likely that Martin Kaiser was about to do the same.

“Let me get this straight,” Kaiser finally said, squaring himself behind the dark walnut desk and casting a seething glare at Benson. “You kept this Rhett Rodgers thing from me for three decades. Now that it's come back to bite you in the ass, you show up here, spill it all in a rush of word-vomit, then sit back and expect me to clean it up for you.” He let out a scoff dripping with disbelief. “The answer is no. We're done. *You're* done. Now get the fuck out of my office, John. This is over. I want Wagner and O'Donnell on a plane back to the United States. I'm going to do this by the book, and I'll deal with the consequences. Fuck, I should have my head examined for even bringing you in on this thing. Just more proof that

maybe I *should* step down. Should have done this by the book to begin with. But instead I get pulled into another one of your Darkwater games.”

“This isn’t *my* game,” Benson said, doing his best to stay calm, to hide the anxiety clawing at his throat. “It’s Rhett’s game, and he’s going to win if you do this by the book.”

Kaiser snorted, shook his head, rubbed his bloodshot eyes. “Listen to us, John. We’ve been operating outside the rules for so long we can’t even *consider* doing things by the book.”

Benson snorted back. “That’s why the Agency exists, Martin. Because America and the world needs people like us, men and women who can walk that line between good and bad, ruthless bastards like us with enough of a moral compass that we don’t get completely lost when we step into the shadows.”

“Yeah, well, you just confirmed that your moral compass hasn’t been pointing true north since the very beginning.”

Kaiser’s fingertips rapped on the desk like he wanted a cigarette. He sighed, then clamped his fingers into fists and glared at Benson. “Why the hell are you still here? I said it’s over. Make the call to Wagner, get them on a plane—cargo

transport or charter flight or fucking Air India, if that's what it takes. I don't give a shit how. Just do it."

Benson took a breath, stroked his chin as he exhaled.  
"Can't."

"This isn't a request. It's a damn order."

Benson shook his head. "No, I really can't do it. Ice Wagner seems to have destroyed his Darkwater phone."

Kaiser sighed. "So call his damn hotel room."

"Tried, but there's no answer. Had the front desk send someone to knock on the door, but there's a DO NOT DISTURB sign outside and so the hotel won't knock." Benson shrugged. "I could say it's an emergency, but we don't know what's happening up there. There's a chance Rhett activated an NOC operator, and we don't want any innocent hotel employees getting killed."

"Fuck." Kaiser's face clouded darker than the walnut floorboards. "What about Edwin Moses?"

Benson raised an eyebrow. "You're kidding, right? If there's really an assassin in that hotel, Moses is only going to get himself killed—and then we've got a bigger mess on our hands. Besides, we might need Moses later if things do get

messy at the hotel. He took care of those bodies at the safe-house. He's good at that kind of mop-up work, but we can't drop him in the middle of a live operation. You know that."

Kaiser narrowed his gaze like he was trying to figure out if Benson was bullshitting him. But Benson wasn't. He knew better than to push it too far. It was one thing to hide information from Kaiser, another to straight up lie to the man. Kaiser was one of two people on earth who could see through Benson's bullshit.

The other was Nancy Sullivan, and Benson sorely missed her steady hand on the wheel. Right now she'd be figuring out a way to contact Ice and Indy without endangering the hotel staff or Moses. Benson wasn't good at these sorts of logistical details. Didn't have the patience for it. Was only as technically savvy as he needed to be to handle his phone and computer.

"All right, well, if you've lost control of your Darkwater man, all the more reason to get the hell out of my office. I'll take it from here." Kaiser snatched up the black desk phone and punched a button. "Get me the Embassy in Mumbai. Yes, I'll hold."

Benson calmly stood from the straight-backed chair, leaned across Kaiser's desk, tapped the reset button on the

desk phone to kill the call. “You can’t bring O’Donnell back to the U.S. in official custody. CIA is a civilian agency, not law enforcement. Which means that the moment O’Donnell steps onto U.S. soil the FBI takes over. And you don’t want that. Nobody wants to give the damn FBI an excuse to pull back the covers on how we do things at Langley.” Benson sat back down. “The Presidential Primaries are coming up. If it comes out that the FBI is investigating the CIA for a possible traitor, the press will be all over it. You’ll have to resign—which maybe you’re ready to do, but not like this, not disgraced after decades of service.” Benson shook his head. “But more than that, you can’t do this because you know in your heart that O’Donnell is being set up. You also know there’s solid electronic evidence implicating O’Donnell. The FBI will absolutely use it to get a conviction and take O’Donnell down for this. You can’t allow that. You’re a cold-hearted snake when you need to be, Martin. And God knows we’ve both turned our backs on assets and operatives when we had to do it for the greater good. But she’s just a kid, Martin. Caught up in something that has nothing to do with her.”

Or *everything* to do with her, Benson thought harshly as the last sentence caught in his throat. He broke eye contact and



stood, hoping feverishly that Kaiser didn't catch the needle of a lie hidden inside a haystack of truth.

Kaiser's jaw tightened as he took a long hard look at Benson. Then with a sigh he pulled the handset away from his ear, slammed it down into the cradle. "Damn it, John. No, I don't want the FBI crawling all over us. All right. We'll wait until you can get back in touch with Wagner and O'Donnell." He tilted his head back, narrowed his eyes up at the standing Benson. "Why did Wagner destroy his phone?"

Benson shrugged noncommittally. "He might not have. Could be a glitch. Hopefully it'll come back online soon enough."

Kaiser's gaze didn't waver. "You get audio and video feeds from those phones, don't you?"

Benson shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "I had the feeds turned off."

Kaiser groaned. "To give them privacy? I should have known. The Darkwater dating agency strikes again. How many people die as collateral damage this time, John? You fucking head-in-the-clouds psycho." He shut his eyes tight, took a slow breath like he was counting up to ten or maybe down to zero. When his eyelids flicked open there was a cold

glint in there which Benson knew well. “Get out, John,” Kaiser said quietly for the third time in about ten minutes. “Now, while I still have the self-control to not have you dragged out in handcuffs.”

Benson glanced at his watch, that trusty old Fossil Chrono from his Navy days, back when things were so much simpler, the stakes so much lower, the grand game barely a sparkle in his eyes.

The game which was very close to what felt like the end.

Well, Benson thought as he watched the second-hand tick its way around the battered watch-face, nothing to do but play it out.

“Out.” Kaiser was standing now, his voice sharp. “Now. I have a meeting in an hour, and I’ve got a hundred emails to get through before then.”

Benson sighed, then stepped back away from Kaiser’s desk and sat down in that straight-backed chair again. He crossed one leg over the other knee, carefully plucked a piece of white lint off his charcoal-gray trousers. “Go ahead and do your emails. But your meeting is now, not in an hour.” Benson glanced at his watch again, then looked up and grinned impishly when a knock sounded at the door. “Ah, there she is.”

Kaiser frowned, raised an eyebrow. “There *who* is?”

“Paige Anderson.” Benson stood and began to stroll his way to the soundproof door. “She’s the CIA-tech that Rhett suckered into doing his dirty work. Seems like a good kid. Smart as hell, but no match for Rhett’s charm.”

“And now you’re going to use *your* charm to get her to flip on Rhett Rodgers?” Kaiser chuckled dryly. “You already said there’s no electronic evidence linking Rhett to a damn thing. If she’s that smart, then she knows we’ve got nothing concrete on her—or Rhett. And that’s assuming you’re right in the first place and it is indeed Rhett setting O’Donnell up.”

“You’ll see I’m right in a minute.” Benson reached for the door handle, glancing at Kaiser over his shoulder. “Just sit quiet and look stern and severe, like you’re annoyed by the distraction. There, that’s the look. Perfect, Martin. Resting-asshole-face is what we’re going for, and you’ve got it nailed.”

Benson pulled open the door before Kaiser could protest. Paige Anderson stood outside, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail so tight it made Benson’s scalp burn in sympathy. She wore a black pant-suit over a high-necked white blouse. Her

sharp blue eyes were bloodshot with anxiety—which was exactly what Benson wanted to see.

“Sit over there,” Benson said without greeting her, without introducing himself, without allowing even a hint of warmth or empathy into his tone. Paige would already be shaking in her booties from being called to the Director’s office, and this would rattle her even more. “No, not that chair. That one’s mine. Yours is over there by the wall.”

Benson closed the door, making sure to slide the deadbolt across it loud enough to send an ominous click through the cavernous office which felt like a cave because Kaiser kept the thick Kevlar-lined curtains drawn closed at all times like maybe he’d been a vampire in a past life, perhaps still had a hankering for fresh human blood now and then.

Kaiser had sat back down behind his desk. He’d put his reading glasses on and was squinting at his unmarked black laptop which looked heavy enough to sink a battleship.

“Don’t mind him,” Kaiser said without looking up from the screen. “He doesn’t work for the Agency.”

Alarm flashed across Paige’s heavily made-up face. At first Benson figured the makeup was to cover the acne scars he’d seen in her file photograph. But the scars probably dated

back to her teenage years, and if she'd been using heavy makeup all this time, then surely she'd be better at applying it after ten years of practice.

No, this was Rhett Rodgers at work. The bastard was using the old trick of finding a woman's insecurities and using them to break down her confidence, make her believe Rhett was doing her a favor by deigning to be with someone so unattractive and flawed. Add to that the age gap, the power differential, Rhett's old-world Southern charm, and the alluring air of mystery he must have picked up from years practicing his dark arts in Eastern Europe and North Africa, and Paige Anderson didn't stand a chance.

But she did have potential, Benson thought now as he studied her composure, saw that she was petrified but still holding it together admirably, showing a strength of will that could certainly be developed by the right circumstances, the right guidance. The intelligence behind those anxiety-ridden eyes was also undeniable. And, of course, her tech skills were indisputable—Benson's own tech-guy had acknowledged that if Paige had really been hacking into the CIA systems, she was so good that even he couldn't find a trace. She was quite literally the ghost in the machine.

Darkwater could use a hacker like Paige Anderson.

If there even was a Darkwater after this mission.

But first things first, Benson reminded himself as he slipped out his phone and tapped his way back to the video that had put Kaiser in that state of stunned disbelief earlier.

Kaiser glanced up from his laptop, peering at Benson over his reading glasses, then shooting an ambiguously loaded look in Paige's direction before going back to his emails. Benson and Kaiser had played this game a hundred times over the years. It wasn't exactly good-cop-bad-cop. Something far more unnerving, because their targets knew that CIA didn't bother with pesky things like the Bill of Rights and Reasonable Doubt.

Not when there was Plausible Deniability.

"Now it's entirely plausible that you did what you did without understanding what you were doing, why you were doing it, and, most importantly, for *whom* you were doing it." Benson showed an emotionless smile as he strolled towards where Paige sat on that straight-backed wooden chair up against the side wall, her legs tight together, palms on her knees, fingertips digging into her pant-suit, crinkling the fabric as she clawed at herself.

Her face flushed redder than the rouge. She said nothing, which was probably Rhett's coaching. Still, Benson saw the hint of a puzzled frown flash across her face.

"I know what you're thinking, Paige," Benson said softly, skipping the formality of calling her Ms. Anderson, allowing some warmth into his voice—which was easy, because he liked the kid, could see her potential, hoped to hell she was self-aware enough to accept that she'd been played, self-assured enough to forgive herself for it, motivated enough to learn from it, courageous enough to use it to become the woman she was destined to be.

A Darkwater woman.

Benson could feel it.

It almost derailed him, the draw was so strong. He didn't know what to make of it, but it gave him hope, sparked a flickering flame of optimism, made him start to believe that perhaps this wasn't the end of the road, that perhaps this tentacled beast called Darkwater wasn't done pulling men and women into its molten core of energy, wasn't through spinning its stories of sex and violence, fate and destiny, always and forever.

“I’m thinking that you have not identified yourself, sir,” came Paige’s response, her voice wavering a little but going steady as she continued. “But I believe you’re John Benson. I recognize your voice from the phone call earlier. You deceptively identified yourself then as Director Kaiser, but Rhett told me who you are. You and Director Kaiser want to bring Rhett down, ruin his reputation in the eyes of Senator Robinson. You’re worried that if Senator Robinson wins the White House, he’ll name Rhett the new CIA Director. This is all a political game, and you’re trying to use me to bring down Rhett.” She shook her head defiantly, shot a look in Kaiser’s direction, then glared up at Benson. “Well, it won’t work. I’ve done nothing wrong. My relationship with Rhett is purely consensual, and since I don’t report directly to him, we aren’t violating Agency policy.”

“Nobody in this room gives a shit about Agency policy.” Benson stopped a few feet in front of the fidgeting Paige, wondering if she understood how close she’d come to having her neck snapped like a toothpick. Benson’s “deceptive” phone call had probably saved her ass, but she was too deeply under Rhett’s spell to take Benson’s word for it.

She’d have to see for herself.



See what kind of man she was defending.

“What’s this?” Paige asked, panic flashing behind her eyes when Benson tapped his phone screen and handed the device to her.

“Relax. Your apartment wasn’t wired for video.” Benson smiled tightly as the grainy thirty-year-old video on his phone began to play. “Rhett’s apartment was, though. Back when his name wasn’t Rhett Rodgers. That’s him thirty years ago. With his infant daughter, barely a week old. Watch it all the way through.”

Paige blinked and nodded, focusing those sharp blue eyes on Benson’s phone.

A minute later her eyes widened.

Another few seconds and her breath caught like it had been sucked out of her.

Then her entire body shuddered with the shock of what she’d seen.

“This can’t be real,” Paige whispered, still staring at the phone even though the video had played all the way through. “The video’s a fake. It’s dark and grainy. You can’t be sure the

man is Rhett. But it doesn't matter because the video is fake. It has to be."

Benson shrugged. "You're the tech genius. You can check if the video file's been altered, if it's a fake. Go ahead. Prove it's a fake."

Paige blinked her gaze away from the chilling horror of what she'd seen on the little screen. She swallowed hard, then nodded. "I'll need to access this file on a computer."

Benson cracked a grin in Kaiser's direction. "Director Kaiser has a computer. Martin, let Paige use your laptop, will you? Oh, don't give me that look. We both know this laptop isn't connected to anything besides your unclassified public-facing email. Besides, there's nothing you have access to that Paige couldn't already hack into with her eyes closed and one hand tied behind her back. Here, I'm sending you the video. Open it up, close out of your email, then trust your own superstar employee not to start the next World War from your computer."

Kaiser glowered at Benson over the top of his laptop. He took a long breath, tapped his chin, then sighed, hit a few keys, and spun the laptop around on his desk. "Go ahead, Ms.

Anderson. I'm as curious as you are about this video's authenticity."

Benson flashed a sharp look at Kaiser but said nothing. What to do with the video was a bridge Benson would cross later. Once Paige verified it was real—and it *was* real—it would only lead to questions that Benson did not particularly want to answer, hopefully would never have to answer.

An electric silence fell across the room as Paige's slender fingers flew across the keyboard, her eyes darting this way and that, her lips moving soundlessly as she worked her magic.

Benson watched her keenly, anxious for a moment that he'd underestimated Rhett Rodgers and overestimated Paige Anderson. Perhaps Rhett's hold on this woman was so complete that she'd lie not just to the CIA Director but even to herself.

Paige's face was a study in concentration. She'd pulled up the video, was playing it in slow-motion, zooming in with what Benson guessed was a video-analysis program downloaded from her own private server somewhere on the dark web.

Kaiser had walked around his desk and was standing behind Paige's hunched shoulders. Benson joined him, a chill

rising up his spine as he watched that scene from thirty years ago like it was happening now.

“It’s real,” came Paige’s breathless voice, her fingers curling into fists over the keyboard, her face almost devoid of color, a ghostly pale like her soul had just been drained out.

“Oh, my God, it’s real. Rhett ... he ... he smothered that little baby. He ... he killed that child. He’s a ... a ...”

Paige recoiled from the laptop like it was poison, staggering to her feet and reeling backwards, her left hand going to her neck, stroking it feverishly like she was recalling something, like maybe Rhett’s hands had been on her throat earlier that day, his deadly fingers caressing her smooth skin, his well-practiced chokehold about to compress her windpipe when fate intervened in the form of Benson dialing the right number at the right time.

“There’s water over by the coffee machine,” said Benson quietly. “Take a minute, then sit back down so we can continue.”

Paige nodded blankly, hurried across the room to the coffee area. Benson watched her open a sealed bottle of spring water and take a shaky sip. To his left he could feel Kaiser staring him down.

Both men understood that the video was a smoking gun—but one that could blow up and kill everyone in the damn room, not just Rhett. Kaiser had immediately dismissed any possibility of showing that video to Senator Robinson. Sure, it would kill any chance of Rhett being named Director, but it would put both Robinson and Kaiser in a very delicate position.

There was no statute of limitations on murder. Robinson would be obligated to pass the video on to the FBI. And that would lead to questions about the CIA's NOC program that nobody—not Benson, not Kaiser, not Robinson, not Congress, not the President, not the American people—wanted answered.

Questions about what CIA did in the shadows.

Questions about how CIA recruited their shadow-warriors.

Questions whose answers straddled that murky space between right and wrong, good and evil, darkness and light, heaven and hell.

“Why isn't he in prison?” came the first of those questions from over by the coffee area. Paige was shaking where she stood, a potent mix of what Benson sensed was humiliation, indignation, and straight-up anger making her eyes flash a startling blue. “That's murder. He pinched that baby's nostrils

closed, covered the child's tiny mouth, waited until the child went still, then calmly sat back and lit a cigarette. He's a psychopath, and he should be in prison, not working for the fucking CIA! Wasn't there a background check? Isn't there a vetting process? How long have you had that video? Who made that video? Why was Rhett under surveillance all those years ago? And if someone was watching, why didn't they intervene? Why didn't they save that innocent child?"

Benson sighed, rubbed his eyes, said nothing.

He just waited for Paige to connect the dots.

It didn't take long.

"Oh, no, please tell me you didn't let a newborn baby die simply to have something on Rhett, to trap him into working for the CIA, blackmail him into joining the NOC program." Paige's voice trembled with the sort of disbelieving rage that Benson knew was a sign of a strong moral compass.

Now he just had to make sure to recalibrate that compass to point towards *his* version of true north.

"Nobody's telling you a damn thing," Benson said with cold authority even as his heart pumped hot blood through every artery and vein. "In fact it's time for *you* to tell *us*

something, Paige. Preferably *everything*. Now sit back down on that chair. You can save the moral indignation for someone who gives a shit.”

Paige’s eyes burned with what Benson knew was beautifully pure hatred. This woman was definitely Darkwater material, and good luck to whoever got pulled into her fiery vortex when the time came.

But that was a game for another day, another mission, another story.

Right now Benson only needed one thing from Paige Anderson.

He waited silently as she stormed back to her chair, sat down hard, crossed one leg over the other knee, folded her arms over her chest, then shrugged her shoulders and waited sulkily for the question.

Benson shot a quick look at Kaiser. The Director had sunk back into his swivel chair, was gazing in Benson’s direction, his fingers tented expectantly. Kaiser knew Benson well enough to guess there was more to the story, that Rhett Rodgers was just the tip of the iceberg, that there were more bones buried in that closet, maybe an entire skeleton.

Benson pursed his lips, swallowed dryly, then asked the question whose answer would confirm what he already knew in his heart, already sensed in his soul, already dreaded in his depths. “Did Rhett ask you to activate an NOC operator in Mumbai?”

Paige stared blankly past Benson, nodded with trancelike resignation, like the adrenaline had worked its way through her system and now she was crashing back to earth, spinning down to reality, a grim gray reality in which she was very much a part of this game, very much lost in that space between right and wrong, good and evil, darkness and light, choice and circumstance.

“Yes,” she said, her shoulders slumping as she exhaled. “He asked me to hack into the Non-Official Cover database. There was an operator available in the Mumbai region. A woman. Rhett asked me to activate her.”

Kaiser sat up straight in his chair, his face clouding over. “You hacked into the NOC database? That’s impossible. And if you did, that’s a serious breach. Do you have any idea what you’ve—”

“I think she’s well aware of what she’s done, Martin. But she’s also well aware of what *we*’ve done.”



Kaiser snorted. “Speak for yourself, John. We’ve crossed many lines together over the years. But Rhett Rodgers was all you.” He shook his head, his eyes flashing in a way that reminded Benson that Kaiser was a father again, a husband again, emotionally vulnerable in a way he’d perhaps never been. “I’m well aware that we’ve recruited convicts and criminals, murderers and psychopaths, used mafia hitmen for wet jobs, cut deals with cartels who traffic both drugs and people. But this was a newborn baby, John. As innocent as life gets.”

“I didn’t think he’d kill the child,” snarled Benson, his jaw tight as wire, his gray eyes blazing silver at the accusation that he’d even *consider* sacrificing a child. “Look, I’d been working on Rhett for months, trying to bring him into the Agency as a regular recruit. But he didn’t want to do it, was having too much fun being the top alpha dog in his little law-school world.” Benson shrugged. “But as I dug deeper, got a better sense of his psychological profile, it lined up well with what we wanted for our NOC program that was just ramping up in a big way back then. I made an offer, but he turned me down again.” Benson ran his fingers through his hair, shrugged again. “Look, Martin, you remember the pressure we were under to staff up the NOC program back then. The Berlin

Wall had come down, the Cold War was over, there were all these new nations popping up in Eastern Europe. We needed smooth-talking operators to get in there and help put the right people into power, the right regimes into place, get rid of players we didn't want on the board—and do it all in a way that could never be linked to the CIA. Rhett fit the profile. He was born to do that kind of work. He just didn't know it yet. Needed some time to find out what kind of a man he was. Maybe needed a nudge in the right direction.” Benson's gaze hardened. “Sometimes you need constraints to force that part of you to surface. You need the pressure of locked-in circumstance to bring the shadow out into the light.” He felt his own shadow flash in his eyes as he gazed at Paige. “Kaiser knows this but you might not. CIA designed the NOC recruitment and training program based on Carl Jung's theories of the Psychological Shadow, the secret parts of our psyche, dark drives and evil emotions that exist in all of us but are repressed by the conventions of society, the rules of civility, the ethics of religion, the teachings of tradition.”

Benson's jaw relaxed a bit, his eyes shining with the conviction that he knew how to walk this line, understood better than most how the shadow worked, how sex and

violence were the two hissing heads of that serpent coiled in the dark side of the human psyche.

“Look,” he said. “I set up the cameras back then just in case I got something on Rhett to give me leverage—just enough to nudge him in the right direction, turn the screws a bit until he realized he was born to work the shadows.” He rubbed his jaw, blinked as he exhaled. “But I didn’t think he’d kill the child. His own daughter.” He glanced at Paige, hoping she’d see the truth in his eyes—well, not the *whole* truth, but Benson hoped to hell that the whole truth could stay buried, prayed that the NOC operator was someone else even though his gut told him who she was, that she couldn’t be anyone else, had to be that woman, fate twisting back on itself, destiny closing the loop Benson had unintentionally opened decades ago. “Remember, this was thirty years ago. We didn’t have live streaming capabilities with the tech back then. The Internet was too slow for that. Those cameras would record video on tiny hard drives hidden in the device, then upload the files to a CIA server every half hour. After that I needed to download the files on my clunky laptop before I could view them.”

“So there was a 30-minute lag in the video,” Paige said, the burning hatred in her eyes settling to a simmer. “You saw it too late to save the child.”

Benson rubbed the back of his neck, nodded noncommittally, wishing he could explain the mechanics of how it had all played out back then.

Played out in a way that defied human biology, thumbed its nose at conventional science, hinted at what Benson had only just started to understand back then and was certain of now.

That there were forces and phenomena that science did not yet understand, could not yet explain, and therefore side-stepped by simply ignoring these forces, denying their existence because it couldn't be measured in a lab, couldn't be repeated in an experiment, couldn't be captured on camera, had to be *felt* to be understood, had to be *experienced* to be believed.

“Why did he do it?” whispered Paige. “If he didn't want the baby, why not just give her up for adoption? And ... and where was the mother? Did Rhett ... did he kill her too?”

“No.” Benson sighed. “I did.”

The color drained from Paige's cheeks. Her body stiffened, eyes flicked to the deadbolted soundproof door. Then she cast a terrified glance in Kaiser's direction. "Should I ... should I be hearing this?"

"Nobody should be hearing this." Kaiser's face was a dark cloud. "John, what the hell are you—"

"Relax, both of you. Paige, you aren't going to end up in a landfill because you know too much." Benson smiled tightly at Paige, shot a glance at Kaiser, then looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. "Trust me, once I get through with what I have to say, I'm the one looking at a one-way ticket to the city dump with a black hood over my head." He sighed out a breath, strolled back to his chair, sat down heavily, then took another breath and finally gazed dreamily in Paige's direction before uttering a single word: "Scarlet."

Paige blinked twice, swallowed once, then nodded in surprise. "Yes. That was the NOC operator's codename. Scarlet. How did you know? The NOC system doesn't save any records. Besides, I covered my tracks perfectly. How did

you ... oh, God, did you ... did you recruit her too? The names, they're both ...”

An incredulous snort exploded from Kaiser. “Rhett and Scarlet? You have got to be kidding, John. Who is Scarlet?”

Benson cast that dreamy gaze at Kaiser. “You can guess who she is, Martin. You’ve seen how these Darkwater missions unfold. You know damn well who she is.”

Kaiser stood abruptly, sending the swivel chair spinning off behind him. He snapped his fingers in Paige’s direction. “Get out, Ms. Anderson. You’re done here. This doesn’t concern you.”

Paige stood up hurriedly, relief washing over her.

“It very much *does* concern you, Paige. Sit back down.” Benson stopped Paige’s brisk walk to the door with a single look that carried the authority of forty years in the Agency. “You too, Martin. Shut the hell up and listen.”

The severity in Benson’s voice stopped Kaiser’s rage in his throat. The Director took a long breath. Then, still red-faced, he nodded at Paige, gesturing with his head for her to sit back down. Kaiser retrieved his still-spinning swivel chair, sank

into it, rubbed his eyes, then gestured with his hand for Benson to get on with it.

“She was a brilliant law student,” Benson said quietly. “One of several women Rhett was sleeping with, but with dazzling potential for the NOC program. CIA desperately needed people in the Indian subcontinent—close to China and Pakistan and Afghanistan and Iran. Of course, they all had to be NOC agents because the damn Indians refuse to allow an official CIA station in their country. She was perfect, so I kept an eye on her as I worked Rhett.”

Kaiser raised an eyebrow. “You had cameras on Scarlet too?”

Benson shook his head. “Wasn’t sure enough at first. Wasn’t certain she had the same ruthlessness I saw in Rhett. And she wasn’t a U.S. citizen, so I’d have needed to call in a favor at the State Department.” He cracked a half-grin at Kaiser. “It was still early in my career, didn’t have a lot of favors racked up yet.”

“And you don’t have a whole lot left,” Kaiser muttered before waving him on. “So what convinced you to go after Scarlet?”

“The child.” Benson’s half-grin faded. “She got pregnant with Rhett’s baby. He wanted her to get rid of it, said he wasn’t cut out to be a dad—and that she sure as hell wasn’t cut out to be a mom.”

Paige shifted in her seat, shot another yearning glance towards the door. But Benson wasn’t going to let her go. Yes, she’d been manipulated by a master, but she wasn’t some clueless creature who had absolutely no inkling of the kind of man Rhett was inside.

In fact Paige had very quickly snapped out from Rhett’s spell after she’d seen that video. Sure, the video was authentic, but it was by no means modern High-Definition footage. The light was bad, and Rhett had been a smoker at the time, which made the room hazy with stale cigarette mist. It definitely looked like Rhett, was enough for Paige to see it was him. But the video was grainy enough that it might not hold up in court, might be enough to establish reasonable doubt—a chance that Rhett didn’t want to take back then, not with the child’s body in Benson’s custody—but would certainly take now if it ever went to trial.

Paige would easily have seen all that, could absolutely have stuck to her guns and argued that it wasn’t Rhett in that



old video, that it wasn't any kind of evidence.

But she didn't, which told Benson that deep inside Paige was perceptive enough to see Rhett's darkness, had perhaps been attracted to it, awakened by it, the danger luring her shadow out from the hidden parts of her psyche just enough to terrify her into retreat.

But Paige knew the shadow was there now, and once she got past the initial shock, she would understand that it was a part of her, that it could be tamed—so long as it had the right outlet, the right channel.

The right man.

Yes, she was a Darkwater woman, Benson decided when he sensed that although a part of her wanted to flee, another part of her couldn't be dragged from this room, was drawn like a magnet to the energy she sensed simmering beneath the surface of this game. Fate had pulled her into this story, and Benson got the distinct sense that his own willingness to come clean in front of her was partly driven by an irresistible urge to bring Paige into Darkwater, show her first-hand how fate spun its web, how destiny cast its spell, how the universe's eternal story kept unfolding anew.

Gotta keep selling the story, Benson thought with an inside smile as his peripheral vision caught Kaiser shifting uncomfortably in his swivel chair.

Because part of Benson's "confession" right now was to also keep selling Kaiser on the story.

Benson had dragged Kaiser kicking and screaming down the Darkwater rabbithole for eight missions now, but it was always a battle, always a struggle, always a sales-pitch to get Martin to hang on for just one more, to sink just a little deeper, go just a little darker.

And although he was still kicking and screaming, Kaiser was most certainly getting mired deep in Darkwater's world, Benson reminded himself when he glanced past the Director's desk towards the bookshelf, which had a new photograph framed front-and-center.

Martin and his wife Alice, each holding one of their cuddly new twins.

Twins brought into their lives at the end of Fox and Fay's mission.

Twins that brought Alice back into Martin's life, forced the two of them to confront their own unfinished love story.

Benson could feel his heart open up with that dizzying expansiveness which felt big enough to overwhelm the world. He swallowed thickly as that effervescent sense of connectedness made his head buzz with almost cosmic bliss. He lost himself in the feeling for a long moment, then forced himself back to the real world.

There was work to be done.

He couldn't lose focus, couldn't think too far ahead, couldn't count too far down the alphabet.

Now anxiety ripped through Benson once more, chasing away that ethereal sense of expansiveness, dragging him startlingly close to all-out panic for one desperate moment.

Suddenly he was thinking about Nancy turning her back on Darkwater, turning her back on *him*. He thought of Kaiser turning his attention to his family. He thought of Diego Vargas on the loose—a deeply troubling development from the last Darkwater mission, a loose end that could change the direction of American democracy if he assassinated Robinson.

There were too many irons in the fire, too many balls in the air, too many things that could go wrong.

Benson took a breath as the panic passed. He regained his customary calmness, but the episode bothered him. There'd been this gnawing anxiety ever since the end of that Hogan-and-Hannah mission, something Benson hadn't felt after the first seven Darkwater missions. For the first time in years doubt swirled beneath Benson's rock-solid foundation of cocky certainty.

And beneath the doubt lurked a deep void, an empty space in his soul.

A space which had once been filled with Sally's love.

A love that felt so far away now, seven years after Sally had been taken from him on that first Darkwater mission.

"Mister Benson, are you all right?" came Paige's voice through the deafening void that was sucking Benson down into a place he didn't want to admit still existed in him.

Shit, he *knew* how the universe worked, *knew* that time and space were illusions, *knew* that there was a secret part of reality where he and Sally were together right that moment.

But hell, sometimes you just lost your grip on the truth, Benson thought, lost your connection to the vastness out there

and got pulled down to the dense dark dimension of flesh and fear, blood and violence, heartbreak and horror.

Because sometimes that's where the real spiritual work was done.

Within the cosmic constraints of three-dimensional reality, the physical limitations of space and time, the savage beauty of flesh and blood.

“Call me John.” Benson found enough of a spark to flash a grin. “Everyone at Darkwater calls me John.”

Paige frowned. “What's Darkwater?”

“You'll have the answer when I finish,” Benson said, that coyote-glint flashing again in his eyes as he kept going forward, kept spinning the story, knowing he needed to lock Paige and Martin into his risky endgame, show them how nobody was truly in control, that the only way to play the game was to surrender to it, lose yourself in it, marvel at its majesty, gape at its grandiosity, get sucked into its story.

“So Rhett tells Scarlet to end the pregnancy,” Benson continued, pushing on, pulling them along. “She refuses, tells him the baby was meant to be, that *they* were meant to be.” Benson chuckled dryly. “Rhett laughs at her, mocks her,

*humiliates* her. It gets him off in a sick way. But it's a mistake. Because it flips a switch in Scarlet. She suddenly gets it, understands that he was playing her, that he used the word *love* as a weapon, took a sick delight in exercising that kind of power over a woman, enjoyed the psychological manipulation almost as much as he enjoyed the physical sex."

Paige visibly stiffened. She touched her face, blinked away a flash of her own humiliation, her own anger at being played by that bastard. Sure, some of that anger was self-directed, but Benson would bet his house that if Paige's thoughts could kill, Rhett Rodgers would be a dead man right now.

Of course, Paige wouldn't be the first woman to want Rhett dead.

Scarlet had gotten there first.

"At first Scarlet threatened him," Benson went on. "He was the law school Dean, and so Scarlet said she'd go public with the pregnancy, ruin his career. But Rhett flipped the script on her, swore he'd make damn sure she lost her scholarship, would lose her visa, end up getting shipped back to New Delhi with an out-of-wedlock child in her bloated belly. Sorry—his words, not mine," Benson hurriedly added when he saw Paige frown. "So Scarlet backed down. It sounded to me like she had

admitted defeat, was submitting to his power. They were in his bugged apartment, and I heard her tell him she'd do what he wanted and end the pregnancy.”

“But obviously she didn't.” Paige leaned forward. She wasn't casting yearning looks towards the exit anymore. “But how did Scarlet keeping the baby lead to you recruiting her as an NOC operator? And how did the baby end up with Rhett?”

Benson exhaled grimly. This was the dicey part, that nebulous space between right and wrong, between science and magic. “At first it did look like she was going to end the pregnancy. I had my guy hack into her computer through the law school's network. Back then the Internet was still fairly young, no real encryption. Her search and email history was all there. She'd contacted a few local organizations that assisted with abortions. But she never followed through. I thought maybe she was on the edge, torn between ending the pregnancy or having the baby in the hope that Rhett would come around once he saw his own child. But her focus was clearly Rhett, not the child.” Benson shrugged. “They kept seeing each other for a couple of months, both of them playing each other in their own ways. For a while Rhett got her believing it would go back to normal once she got rid of the

child. I think Scarlet *wanted* to believe that. But she couldn't, not anymore, not after the veil of innocence had been ripped off." Benson paused a beat. "Not after Rhett had awakened Scarlet's own shadow, forced enough of it into the light that Scarlet was becoming a new person now, but also more herself in a way. And that's when I knew she had what it took. Rhett had screwed up when he awakened that part of her, but he was still right about one thing: She wasn't cut out to be a mother, wasn't destined to nurture new life. Perhaps it was a combination of her conservative upbringing, where sex out of wedlock was so taboo it cast a dangerously dark shadow. Or maybe there really is something about how people are wired. Either way, I saw it in her."

Paige took a breath. "But you said there were no cameras in Scarlet's apartment. So what ... what did you see?"

Benson ran the back of his hand over his cheek, feeling the beginnings of day-old stubble. "My tech-guy set me up with a direct link to monitor what she was doing on her computer. About three months into her pregnancy Scarlet stopped running searches for abortions and instead spent all her time in the WESTLAW databases looking up old court cases."



Benson glanced at Paige, then Kaiser. They were both rapt. Benson smiled inwardly, then continued. “Which of course is normal for a law student. She’d pull up old cases, make notes in a separate text document. I figured she was doing it for a class, so I didn’t pay much attention for the next few months.” Benson shrugged. “Rhett and Scarlet were just two of many potential recruits. I had a lot of irons in the fire at the time. Was working prospects from all the top universities up and down the eastern seaboard.”

“Did they all get codenames from great American novels?” Paige asked with the hint of a smile, like perhaps she understood the importance of names, would maybe someday understand that her own name marked her for a particular path, a particular story, a particular man. “Did you name them yourself when they got into the NOC system? You did, didn’t you?”

Benson smiled, a hint of color rushing to his cheeks. It had seemed a harmless bit of fun at the time. It had started with Rhett, who’d been the only one who chose his own name. But then Benson followed the theme, seeing that it sort of fit—after all, once they entered the NOC program, all Benson’s recruits were quite literally *gone with the wind*.

The way the system worked, even Benson wouldn't be able to stay in touch with them, wouldn't know their covers, wouldn't be able to contact them unless he was heading up a covert operation and became a designated handler. He was still far down the totem pole back then, still a few years away from being able to head up his own international operations. So the early recruits like Rhett and Scarlet vanished from Benson's sight like smoke on a winter's night.

The smile stayed on his lips, but those lips stayed sealed. Benson didn't want to push his luck with Kaiser. Martin hated Benson's obsession with names, couldn't stop rolling his eyes at Benson's insistence that names were magical, that a rose by any other name would absolutely *not* smell as sweet, that names carry power, decide their own destinies, seek out their own fates.

Sometimes even their own mates.

Now Benson's attention snapped back to Ice and Indy, and immediately the smile was gone from his face and the clock began to tick in his mind. Paige had activated Scarlet hours ago. Ice's phone went offline shortly after that. For all Benson knew, Ice and Indy were already dead.

Let it play out, he told himself as that uncharacteristic anxiety gnawed at his insides. Either way, there was no pulling the plug on Scarlet now. As Benson's tech-guy had explained, Paige's NOC-hack would probably have broken the connection between Scarlet and her handler.

Which meant Scarlet was a weapon that had already been fired.

So Benson had to trust Ice and Indy to take care of themselves for now. His job was to set the game-board up in the United States, position the remaining players so that if Indy and Ice did make it through whatever challenge their fate had tossed at them, they'd have a shot at ending this game the right way, the only way it *could* end.

With Rhett Rodgers dead.

There was no other option. Benson knew it and he hoped Kaiser knew it too. There would be no snitching to the FBI, no tale-telling to Senator Robinson. This would be handled the CIA way.

Old-school and underground.

In the shadows where it belonged.

Paige's lighthearted question about the names still hung heavy in the air, but Benson ignored it, feeling an urgency to get to the end, deliver the punchline—and hope to hell it landed right.

“Like I said, I was distracted chasing other recruits,” Benson continued. “When I checked in months later I was surprised to see that not only had Scarlet decided to keep the baby, but she'd gone public with the pregnancy. Rhett had just been fired, but Scarlet had been ruined too. I found emails from her family back in New Delhi. She'd told them everything and they'd cut her off, disowned her like she'd been tainted. Her father called her a whore for getting knocked up by a white man out of wedlock, for showing her sinfully swollen belly like it was a point of pride.”

“Wait, Scarlet told her parents everything even though she must have known they'd disown her?” Paige tilted her head and frowned. “So maybe she'd decided she wanted the baby more than anything else, that everyone else could go to hell and she was going to be a kickass single mom and superstar lawyer.”

Benson smiled at Paige's earnest optimism. “That did occur to me, yes. But no such luck.” The smile faded as the

memory resurfaced. “You did get the second part right, though. She wanted to be a superstar lawyer, but her shadow was running the show now, and it wanted vengeance along the way. Killing Rhett’s career wasn’t enough. She wanted to kill *him*. His rejection awakened a dragon in her, a dense dark shadow that carried all the emotional repression of her upbringing, tripping all the wires that lit up the grid of her psychosis, her natural drive to destroy instead of create— exactly what the CIA looks for.” Benson took a breath, hissed it out through gritted teeth. “Except I didn’t see it until the very end. Didn’t see that keeping the baby wasn’t Scarlet’s heart softening. The baby was just a means to an end. Just a prop on the stage of her madness.” He sighed, shook his head. “I recovered a deleted document on her computer outlining her legal defense. Scarlet was planning a temporary insanity plea. She’d worked out the story. Naïve young girl in a foreign land gets played by an older man in a position of authority. She gets pregnant, is dumped by the man she thinks loves her. Then her conservative parents back home disown her, cut her off from her past. Suddenly she’s alone in the world, betrayed and humiliated, shell-shocked and stunned, teetering on the edge of a breakdown. Then comes the final psychotic break. She gives birth.” Benson exhaled. “And the child is stillborn. It’s

too much to handle. She snaps, kills the man who put this all into motion. Doesn't try to hide or destroy evidence. Instead turns herself in, rolls the dice that her story is tragic enough that she can get a jury to acquit her on grounds of a temporary psychotic break, post-partum taken to the extreme, manifesting in homicide instead of suicide. Scarlet had found relevant caselaw. She'd cited psychological studies." Benson smiled thinly, a hint of dark admiration in his voice. "It might have worked in court. Might have even made her famous as a cult figure of sorts—especially if people privately supported what she'd done, if people felt the secret thrill of their own shadows taking dark delight in what she'd had the audacity to pull off, dispensing justice in a way most people would never dare."

Kaiser flinched and rubbed his eyes. "That's one hell of a gamble."

Paige gasped and covered her mouth. "Wait, what do you mean by *stillborn*? Oh, God, she ... she was planning to ..."

Benson nodded. "She'd been telling her classmates about how she wanted to have the child at home, the natural way. Setting up every detail in her story. She planned it perfectly. Set the stage with breathtaking brilliance. A superb example of what you're capable of when your shadow takes control."

Rhett's betrayal triggered the darkest elements of the shadow—sex and violence. That's what society, religion, and tradition want to repress most of all, and it's why there's so much darkness associated with those deeply rooted drives." He shrugged, shook his head. "Scarlet channeled all that energy, focused it to a sharp point, bet on herself to force it through. She was counting on the power of her emotions to turn fate in her direction, twist destiny into submission. She might not have *known* she was doing that—hell, back then even I didn't fully understand the power of human emotions. But I did have a sense that she might have gotten away with it, was good enough to pull it off."

Benson blinked rapidly now, his mind spinning back to that crackling clear moment when he'd seen the last part of her plan, the pivotal moment which would make the whole story work for her.

"Scarlet knew the plan wouldn't work if she had an abortion and then later killed Rhett," Benson said quietly. "She knew abortion was a divisive thing in America, that it would split the jury—especially the women in the jury. But a stillborn child was a universally understood tragedy. Add in the rejections by her lover and her family and the story is

powerful, alluring, hard to resist. Scarlet knew she would just need one person in the jury to hold firm to a Not-Guilty verdict.”

“Hung jury,” Kaiser muttered, a hint of angry admiration in his tone. “Judge is forced to dismiss. State could bring it to trial again, but no prosecutor would want to risk losing twice. If Scarlet was sympathetic enough in the press and the courtroom the first time around, the hung-jury decision might be the end of it. District Attorney might just take the hit and let it go.”

Paige let go of another gasp, like she was still picturing what Benson had left unsaid, was feeling it in a way perhaps the two men in the room couldn't.

“Oh, my God, she was going to give birth at home alone, then kill her own child and pretend it was stillborn?” Paige was on her feet now, hugging herself as she approached Benson. “But you stopped it, right? You got there in time.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “But you didn't have cameras in her place. So how ...”

“I don't know how,” said Benson softly. “And I don't know what. All I know is that I'd come back to town just past the eight-month mark, well before the baby was due. Didn't



want to take any chances that Scarlet might hurt the child. Figured I'd try a straight-up recruitment pitch, with the deleted document as a backup in case Scarlet needed a nudge." He rubbed the back of his head, exhaled heavily as his mind went back to that day, to those events that had taught Benson a thing or two about circumstance and coincidence, biology and belief, how time and space colluded to drag people to their fates. "I was in my hotel room, had just ordered room service, was unpacking my suitcase. Along with my CIA-issued gadgets was a radio-frequency scanner—the kind that picks up police and paramedic emergency channels." Benson shrugged. "I always carried it, just in case, but rarely used it. But that night for some reason I turned it on, maybe just for entertainment, I don't know, it was an absentminded decision, almost unconscious." He glanced at Kaiser, then gazed into Paige's eyes, finally blinked off towards the floor and shook his head. "Room service had just arrived when I picked up a 911 call on the scanner. Woman's voice, hysterical and sobbing, saying her baby wasn't moving, that she'd given birth prematurely at home and the child wasn't breathing. It was Scarlet."

"Premature? Wait, so maybe she *didn't* do anything to the baby!" Paige cried hopefully. "It came early, so maybe—"

“Let him finish.” Kaiser stared at Benson. “What did *you* do, John?”

Benson blinked twice. “Hotel was just a few blocks from Scarlet’s place. I got there before the paramedics, busted in through the door.” He swallowed hard. “Scarlet was on the floor, naked on a plastic sheet, blood all around her, caul and placenta and cord between her spread-out legs. The child was at her breast, like it had been suckling. Scarlet was staring at the ceiling, her eyes glazed over, her face expressionless, like she was in a trance. She snapped out of it when I burst through the door. I took the child off her, placed it on the table, tried to give CPR. But the little girl was still as a stone, silent as death. She was gone. I knew it the moment I held its lifeless little body. And then I knew Scarlet hadn’t called 911 immediately after suffocating her. It was murder.”

Kaiser exhaled hard. “She waited before calling it in so there’d be no chance of reviving the child.”

Benson nodded, rubbed the back of his neck. “This next part is still a blur, but I remember thinking that it was taking too fucking long for the ambulance to get there.” He shrugged. “So I just snatched that tiny little girl from the table, wrapped her in my jacket, raced down to my car without giving a damn

about Scarlet. Sped to the ER even though I knew it was too late, that the child was too far gone, well past the threshold, nothing but an empty shell devoid of its life-force.” Benson blinked twice, huffed out a breath. “But just as I screeched into the hospital lot the child made a sound beside me. The strangest sound. It wasn’t a gasp or sputter or a cry. It was like a sigh, but in ... *reverse*. There was a gravity to it, a weight, a heaviness that I still remember clearly. The strangest thing, like something had suddenly entered the child.”

“It was taking a breath,” said Kaiser evenly. “That’s all it was.”

Benson shook his head. “That first sound wasn’t air entering her lungs. I mean, the child *did* start breathing after that strange sound. But that sound was of something entering the body. Something that had maybe left when the child died, but chose to come back.”

“You mean ... like a soul, a spirit?” Paige’s voice wavered. “Like it had chosen to come back after it left the body? I’ve read stories of near-death experiences where people swear they were given a choice of whether to return to their body, to continue their lives. Do you think it was—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Kaiser slammed his palms down on the desk. “The baby clearly wasn’t dead in the first place. A premature newborn would be so tiny it might be hard to get a pulse, hard to tell if it was breathing.” He slapped the desk again, shook his head and glared at Benson. “You must have been mistaken about the timing. Scarlet must have called 911 immediately after all. Paige is right—Scarlet must have been out of her mind after giving birth alone at home. Maybe she couldn’t go through with her plan once she saw her baby. Maybe she did nothing wrong at all, even if she’d planned to. Maybe she ... wait, what did you do with the baby after it started breathing, John? Did you take her into the ER?”

Benson looked up at the ceiling. “Child was suddenly breathing fine, bawling like it had the world’s strongest lungs. So I made a snap decision. Called the Langley hotline. Had them kill the 911 response before the cops and ambulance got to Scarlet’s place. We were already in Virginia, so it was easy. Police know better than to ask questions when Langley sends them home.” Benson looked away from the ceiling, but didn’t meet Kaiser’s gaze. He stared past Paige towards the bookshelf with that new family photograph, Fay’s dead sister’s twins, survivors of that unspeakable horror now smiling in Martin and Alice’s arms. Fate was a funny thing, wasn’t it?

But fate wasn't magic.

Fate was a choice.

And Benson had made a choice that night.

He glanced at Kaiser now, his gaze hardening. "CIA had a safe-house with fully-staffed medical facilities not far from town. I took the child there, left it in safe hands, then drove back to Scarlet's place." He took a slow breath. "Told her the baby didn't make it."

"*What?*" Paige's breath caught sharply. "How could you ... how could you do that? How could you do that to a new mother? You didn't even know if she intentionally tried to smother the child, if she actually followed through with any of that stuff she'd written. Maybe she never meant it at all. She might just have been working through her anger by writing it out. Like journaling or something. It wasn't your choice to make. You're a ... you're a bastard, Benson."

"Tell me something I don't know." Benson chuckled darkly, noting she'd called him Benson instead of John or— heaven forbid—*Mister* Benson. "Your righteous anger is adorable, Paige. But you aren't that fucking naïve. You've seen the kind of decisions the men and women who run this organization have to make every damn day. You know what

kind of people we are. You sit there in your little tech-bunker and tell yourself you're just following orders. But you're no angel, Paige. Rhett asked you to frame Indy O'Donnell for treason and you damn well did it. You don't get to judge anyone in this building, certainly not anyone in this room. We're all cut from the same cloth. We're all patriots, sure. But there's also a streak of cold-blooded ruthlessness in all of us. Don't pretend like you don't have it. You have it all right—that cold dark streak. That's partly why you were so drawn to Rhett.” His gaze softened a little when he saw the shock streak across Paige's face. “That said, there's also a strong balance of goodness and light in your heart, which is why I'm trusting you by telling you all this. But there is most certainly a part of you that relishes the thought of seeing Rhett burn. So please spare us the bullshit moralizing.”

“I can't believe you think I—” Paige started to protest, but one cold knowing look from Benson forced those words back down her throat. She stood there red-faced and indignant, then turned on her heel and stormed back to her chair against the wall. She sat down hard, then crossed her arms over her chest, pouted for one long moment, then huffed out a breath. Her eyes narrowed to slits, but the light in them blazed with acceptance, not anger.

Benson noticed Kaiser's sharp gaze lingering on Paige, like the wheels were turning in the CIA Director's mind too, like he now saw the potential in this geeky woman with the acne scars and the broken heart.

Damn it, Benson thought with wry amusement—Darkwater might have to fight Kaiser and the CIA for Paige Anderson's next employment contract.

But for that Darkwater needed to still exist, and Kaiser needed to still be running the CIA—which meant Benson needed to get to the point, complete the pitch, lock in the sale.

“Look,” he said softly to them both. “The child was alive and safe, so I turned my attention back to recruiting Scarlet. But you're both right—I needed to be sure it wasn't just an accident, needed to confirm that Scarlet really was the woman I thought she was. I told Scarlet her daughter didn't make it so I could see her reaction, figure out if the woman was genuinely shattered or if it was all an act.”

Kaiser nodded. “And?”

Benson shrugged. “Truth is, I think it was a bit of both—a performance but also genuine trauma that she was leaning into, using real emotion to add authenticity to the act. That's

how we train NOC operators to work. It's not that different from method acting."

Paige nodded. "Harnessing real emotions to make the act so authentic you can't tell the difference."

"Because in a way there *is* no difference," Benson said. "The emotions are real, which makes the act real. Scarlet was a natural—so good I knew she could become one of our best NOC agents." He sighed. "But it was hard to break her. She'd wiped everything from her computer weeks earlier. She absolutely denied that the deleted document ever existed, claiming that I had manufactured it myself, planted it on her computer. When I told her who I was, she reminded me that CIA was a civilian agency with no jurisdiction inside the United States. She was good. Confident. Articulate." He chuckled. "She would have made a formidable lawyer. She had this burning need to win—the same fire that couldn't let Rhett's betrayal go unpunished."

Paige frowned. "So how did you finally get her to confess?"

Benson smiled. "I suggested she think in terms of probabilities. Even if I had never existed, she'd be taking a big gamble that her defense would hold up in court. But add me to



the mix and the odds change drastically—and not in her favor. I had the document, along with proof that it had existed on her computer. She could contest it, and maybe it wouldn't hold up in court. But the District Attorney would still take the document seriously—coming from a CIA guy it would certainly hold weight, even more so if I leaked it to the press.” He smiled tightly. “Then I told her I wasn't judging her, that in fact I understood her, was giving her a chance to embrace the person she was and channel those skills into a higher purpose.” He took a breath. “She went quiet after that, and I knew I had her. So I made my offer. Death certificates saying both mother and baby died in childbirth. New identity along with U.S. citizenship. Training. Compensation. A chance to give free rein to her shadow. Might even be fun, I suggested.” He shrugged. “That mix of threat and temptation broke her. She confessed to smothering the child against her breast, then waiting until she was certain the girl was dead. She took the deal.”

Kaiser chuckled grimly. “Always the salesman.” His brow furrowed. “What about the child?”

“And what about Rhett?” added Paige.

Benson leaned back, stretched his arms, cracked a smile.

“One at a time. I got back to the CIA medical station later that night. They said the girl was healthy, alert, totally fine. A little undersized because of the early birth, but no need for incubation or anything like that.” He swallowed. “They kept the child under 24-7 care for the next few days. In hindsight, that was a mistake. It gave me too much time to think.”

Benson grinned. “My conscience was clear about lying to Scarlet. Once she accepted my deal, she dropped any claims that the child was stillborn and confessed. That was enough for me. In my mind she’d given up the right to her daughter—hell, it would have been borderline criminal to give that little girl back to her murderous mother. I was going to immediately arrange a closed adoption for the child, but naïve sentimental fool that I was back then, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed to at least give Rhett a chance to be a father.” He shrugged. “Who knew—maybe seeing his baby would trigger something paternal and protective in the guy. Sure, it might get complicated if Scarlet found out her baby was still alive, but I figured I’d cross that bridge later. Back then birth and death records weren’t so digitized, weren’t so connected—it was way easier to alter records without leaving a trace.” He sighed. “Anyway, since it was already public that Rhett was the father,

I just got some Langley folks to put on uniforms, pretend they were cops and Child Protective Services, deliver Rhett's little bundle of joy to his ever-loving arms." Benson chuckled dryly, shook his head. "Bad move, obviously. Shit, I thought worst case Rhett would simply give the kid up for adoption. Something like that would barely make the news, and I could get the records sealed behind the scenes to make sure Scarlet never found out. Seemed to check all the boxes at the time. I'd get Scarlet into the program and still do right by the child by giving Rhett the chance to make his own choice." Benson's face clouded over. "Didn't think he'd make *that* fucking choice, though."

Kaiser grunted. "No shit. What was his plan?"

Benson shrugged. "Similar to Scarlet's. Call 911 and say the baby had stopped breathing. He was careful not to leave any marks on the child's nose and mouth when he suffocated her."

"I don't understand," Paige said. "Why not just give up the child for adoption? Why take the risk some Medical Examiner rules it a homicide instead of an accidental death?"

Benson's eyes hardened. "Scarlet and that child ruined his life. He'd been told Scarlet died in childbirth. So there was just

the baby left now. Rhett wasn't going to let her go unpunished."

Paige stared, her mouth hanging open for a moment, then snapping shut as if she'd just remembered being alone in a room with Rhett earlier that day. "He killed his own innocent child for ... for *revenge*? After the mother tried to do the same thing for the same reason? These are the people we recruit into the CIA? Pay with taxpayer money?"

"Actually, it's not all taxpayer money." Benson winked at Kaiser. "CIA gets to keep any assets seized from suspected terrorist organizations—or really, anyone we get our hands on outside the United States. And over the past few years we've built up a nice stash of cryptocurrency too. Very handy for untraceable payments. Right, Martin?"

Kaiser neither confirmed nor denied a damn thing, instead choosing to ignore Benson after shooting him a deadly look. Paige stayed silent and speechless, her mouth still agape.

"Grow up, kid," said Benson to Paige. "CIA isn't in the justice business. We use whatever we can, whoever we can, however we can. Nothing is off limits when it serves the bigger picture."

Kaiser rumbled out a breath. “Not sure if we’re both seeing the same bigger picture these days, John.” He stroked his chin, glanced at Paige, then shrugged. “But he is mostly right. NOC operators don’t get diplomatic immunity, are immediately disavowed if they get caught. They’re paid well, but nobody takes that job for the money. Not with that level of risk. You’d have to be insane to volunteer, and a psychopath to succeed. The whole job is about manipulation and murder. There’s no room for normal human emotions, and so we look for people hardwired to operate outside that range.” He glanced at Benson, then nodded with grim acknowledgment. “What John did is a bit extreme, but not that far from standard operating procedure when it comes to the NOC world. Rhett is a cold-blooded killer, a psychopath who takes delight in manipulating people and then destroying them. But he spent twenty-three years in the NOC program before signing on as official CIA. Bill Morris was his handler on several NOC jobs, says the guy’s done things that saved American lives, no question about it. Same with Scarlet, and every NOC asset that made it through more than one job.” He exhaled softly. “And nobody will ever know exactly what they did. There’s no record of those jobs outside the memories of those operators and their handlers. These are the real ghosts in the machine, the real

spirits behind the scenes.” He chuckled, flashed a look in Benson’s direction. “The only kind of ghosts I believe in.”

Benson grinned impishly but said nothing.

Paige forced a sad smile. “Well, if ghosts do exist, I hope that innocent child who was nothing but collateral damage comes back to haunt her wicked parents.” She shook her head and sighed. “Poor thing. Did she even live long enough to be named before Rhett killed her?”

Benson rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I wanted to name her Bonnie—you know, Rhett and Scarlet’s doomed daughter from *Gone with the Wind*.” He shrugged. “But it didn’t fit. After all, Bonnie dies in the novel.” He sighed exaggeratedly, his eyes twinkling. “So I named her India instead. Side character’s name, but who would have thought little unloved unwanted Indy O’Donnell would grow up to play a starring role in this story.”

Both Kaiser and Paige stopped breathing at the same time.

Benson closed his eyes and counted, wondering which member of his captive audience would come around first.

Kaiser was silent as death. Benson considered checking his pulse, but then Paige's chair moved on the wooden floorboards. She'd stood up, had taken three steps to the center of the room, then stopped. Benson opened one eye to see if she was breathing or if she'd died of shock standing up.

"OK, wait," she said, disbelief washing all the color from her cheeks, the badly applied makeup revealing ghostly white patches beneath the gaudy pinkish red rouge. She shot a panicked glance at Kaiser, like she was desperately hoping this was some kind of prank, a tag-team interrogation to get her all turned around. "Wait," she said again, now grinning like a plastic-faced doll who'd just been animated and was confused about her place in this shifting reality. "What are you saying? I don't follow. Rhett killed that child. It's on the video. You said you didn't get there in time to stop it. You said the video wasn't streaming, so you couldn't have seen it in time,

couldn't have gotten there until at least thirty minutes after the child had stopped breathing. So how ...”

Benson glanced at Kaiser, who was paler than Paige but at least was breathing again. Then Benson crossed one leg over the other knee, frowned when he noticed what looked like the very same piece of white lint that he could have sworn he'd plucked off earlier, like maybe time had twisted around and was replaying itself, looping around just like Benson's choices had looped around across thirty years, forming a noose that had drawn in all the players, was tightening now as the endgame approached.

“You know why I remember the child's strange reverse-sigh so well after all these years?” Benson glanced up dreamily, relaxing his vision so his perspective broadened, zooming out like he was somehow above himself, outside himself, looking down at the three blurry figures in the room like perhaps Indy's trickster soul had done all those years ago as it debated whether to re-enter that little girl's body. “It's because I heard that sound *twice*. Felt that heaviness *twice*. Sensed something enter that lifeless little body *twice*.” Benson smiled, shook his head. “Yes, I got there late again—but somehow just in time again. Rhett hadn't called 911 yet. I



broke down his door. My gun was drawn, I pointed it at his face, was *so* damn close to pulling the trigger for what he'd done, for what *I'd* done by being dumb enough to give that cold-hearted snake a chance, give him a choice." He trembled out a breath. "But then I looked at that tiny lifeless body on the table and something pushed me to get her out of there, get her back to that medical center, just in case ... in case I hadn't been imagining it the first time after her mother smothered her, hadn't been hearing things with that strange reverse-sigh, hadn't been hallucinating when I sensed something enter that child, something return to that child after leaving it." Benson's head was buzzing now. "And I was right," he whispered. "While I was driving I heard that reverse-sigh again, and I swear I felt something *swish* past me in the car, something that jolted the child to life like an electric current surging through its little body wrapped in my jacket on the passenger seat beside me. That child *insisted* on being born, on having this experience, on coming back again and again as if there was an invisible thread that couldn't be broken, business that could not stay unfinished."

"You're delusional," said Kaiser, his voice rasping and low, his eyes bloodshot from rubbing them. "You were delusional then and you're sure as hell delusional now."

“Am I?” Benson stood, narrowing his gaze at Kaiser, then glancing at Paige, who was muttering under her breath, shaking her head in tiny little jerks. “Well, you know what? It doesn’t matter what you believe—what either of you believe.”

“But ... but Rhett didn’t know about Scarlet when we activated her today.” Paige’s voice wavered. “And he *definitely* didn’t know about Indy O’Donnell when he had me plant the evidence on her phone.” She frowned in Benson’s direction. “Did you ... did you set this up to bring them all together?”

Benson held her gaze, held his smile, held that question as long as he could, feeling Kaiser’s stare burning a hole in the side of his head.

“Tell her, Martin,” whispered Benson, keeping that dreamy gaze fixed on Paige’s stricken face. “Tell her that you were the one who called me in for the O’Donnell thing. Tell her that I didn’t even know Rhett Rodgers had been brought in out of the shadows by Bill Morris. It happened after I’d left the Agency.” He smiled lazily at Paige. “And although I’d guessed you’d activated Scarlet, I didn’t know for sure until you confirmed it.” He shook his head. “I hadn’t thought about any of this stuff until Kaiser called me with Indy O’Donnell’s

name. Rhett and Scarlet were just two recruits out of dozens of shady characters I put into the NOC program in my forty years of service.”

Paige shook her head again with those tiny little shakes that Benson hoped weren't mini-seizures. She glanced at Kaiser, blinking rapidly, that plastic-smile still plastered on her lips, like she was desperately hoping this was a trick. “I ... I don't understand what's happening,” she managed to whisper.

Kaiser stayed silent, his brow furrowed so deep the worry-lines looked like an aerial view of the Appalachians. He rubbed his temples, staring at the blotter on his desk, his lips so tight they looked like white strips painted on his blood-drained face.

“Martin understands what's happening,” Benson said softly. “He's seen it before. Eight times and counting.” He cracked a grin in Kaiser's direction. “Of course, it still knocks him on his ass every time. Look at him. He's trying so damn hard to come up with some explanation for how I set this up, how I arranged the whole thing, how I'm the wizard behind the curtain, the puppet-master pulling the strings.”

“Shut up, John,” growled Kaiser. “There's no way this could have just ... happened. No way it's all just coincidence.”

He glanced at Paige. “If Benson didn’t set this up, then it has to be Rhett. He must have found out about O’Donnell. He must have found out about Scarlet. The guy’s a master manipulator with thirty years of practice. Maybe he set this whole thing up to bring down everyone, all of us, everyone on his damn hit list.”

Paige swallowed, blinked rapidly, then shook her head. “No, you don’t understand. I was the one who sent Rhett the O’Donnell position paper. He’d never even heard of O’Donnell before that. And Scarlet ... well, I guess Rhett could have used her before on some covert operation over the past seven years and found out who she was, could have pretended like he didn’t recognize the codename earlier today. But I made a joke about the names Rhett and Scarlet lining up—got zero reaction from him. At first he suspected it was a trap set by Benson, the name Scarlet just a dummy file, like a fuck-you from Benson. Rhett didn’t know it was ... it was her. The mother of his child. A child that he didn’t know was O’Donnell, absolutely didn’t.” Paige shook her head with more firmness. “Besides, if Rhett planned all of it, then why not have me activate Scarlet to begin with? Instead he sent in that subcontracted wet-team on short notice. And he was *definitely* blindsided when he learned Director Kaiser had

gotten Benson involved. He wasn't expecting that—it was only when he looked through O'Donnell's file closely and saw the note that Benson had recruited her ...” Paige trailed off, cocking her head to the left, narrowing her eyes at Benson in a way that told him she was getting it, getting there, getting close enough for him to pull her in, pull her down, pull her out of the straight world and into Wonderland. “Ohmygod, wait, you recruited Indy O'Donnell too, didn't you?”

“I did recruit her. Eight years ago, not long before I left the Agency.” Benson shrugged out a smile. “I'd placed her with the O'Donnell family—unbeknownst to them, of course. It was a blind adoption, just the name India being passed on. And yes, I'd checked in on Indy's progress over the years. But I never made any contact with Indy until she was in college at Yale, studying politics and government, showing an interest in foreign policy.” He shrugged again. “CIA has always recruited from the Ivy League universities. So in her Junior year I reached out to her. Planted the seed that perhaps CIA might be an exciting career choice.” He glanced at Kaiser, then back at Paige. “Look, Martin knows me well enough, so I'll also admit that when Indy joined CIA, in the back of my mind I wondered if all three of them would cross paths in some way.” He shook his head, his gaze dead serious. “But I did not

engineer this. I *could* not engineer this. And even if I could, why would I put Indy O'Donnell in danger? Seeing that little girl quite literally come back to life in my car—not once but *twice*—is burned into my memory like a brand.” He shook his head again. “No, I didn’t engineer this.” He took a breath, swallowed hard. “*She* did. Indy O'Donnell caused this.”

Paige frowned. “Indy O’Donnell? Why would she? And how could she? It doesn’t make any sense. I don’t—”

“Of course it doesn’t make sense.” Kaiser interrupted before Benson could respond. “Look, it doesn’t matter. Don’t let Benson drag you into this cosmic coincidence crap. It’s like they say about wrestling with a pig—you both get dirty but the pig likes it.” He stood now, waving away Benson’s piggy grin, keeping his focus on Paige. “We might have enough to take Rhett down. But first things first—Paige, get back into the NOC system and shut Scarlet down. Then send me whatever you’ve got proving O’Donnell was set up. I’ll take it to Senator Robinson to give him a heads-up, then I’ll immediately suspend Rhett Rodgers pending a full investigation. End of story.”

Benson shook his head but stayed silent because Paige was shaking her head too.

“I can’t,” she said, panic briefly flashing behind her eyes.

Kaiser took a breath to calm himself down, then forced a reassuring smile. “I’m not going to burn you along with Rhett. You have my word on that.”

Paige shook her head again. “It’s not that. I mean I literally can’t do anything about Scarlet.” She glanced hurriedly at Benson. “We activated Scarlet by hacking anonymously into the NOC system. That means there’s no handler assigned to Scarlet, which means there’s no connection, no way to contact her, no way to cancel that mission.” She looked back at Kaiser. “Unless you have access to some offline list of all NOC agent identities. Do you?”

Kaiser rubbed his chin, then shook his head. “Not anymore. The last one was destroyed almost a decade ago.” He shot a glance at Benson, then sighed in Paige’s direction. “One of our NOC operators got picked up after assassinating a North Korean official vacationing in Hong Kong. They shipped our guy back to North Korea. Tortured him until he admitted he was a non-official covert agent for the CIA. Of course, we had to disavow him, deny any connection, refuse to negotiate any sort of release. His cover was good enough that the North Koreans couldn’t confirm his U.S. citizenship—we set many of our NOC operators up that way so the State Department doesn’t get involved and the White House doesn’t get public pressure to negotiate or send in the damn cavalry and start a war.” His eyes darkened. “We had to simply shrug and let North Korea execute him. Anything else would risk



more American lives. Like so many things in our world, we had to choose between two bad options.” Kaiser exhaled heavily. “Some self-righteous members of Congress got all worked up that we were doing unsanctioned assassinations using *non-official mercenaries* as they phrased it. They arranged a Congressional Hearing—a political witch-hunt to make CIA look like above-the-law thugs, which would have made the President at the time look bad. We tried to get the White House to block it, citing National Security concerns. But they had to let it play out or else it might look like the President was abusing executive privilege to protect his re-election chances. Damn political games.” Kaiser sighed. “I was scheduled to testify to Congress under oath.” He shot a knowing glance at Benson, then looked grimly at Paige. “I had no specific knowledge about that Hong Kong hit, so I could deny it without perjuring myself. But the hearing was going to be about NOC operations in general, and so CIA Legal Counsel recommended that I temporarily suspend the NOC program, delete all records, and immediately cut off any access the Director would ever have to future NOC information.”

Paige swallowed tightly, her face reddening. “So you could basically lie to Congress without perjuring yourself and the

Agency.”

Kaiser stiffened, then nodded. “My standard response was *There is no active NOC program that I am currently aware of within the Director’s purview*. CIA Legal instructed me to repeat that line verbatim for any and all questions related to the NOC program—past, present, or future.” He shrugged. “After that we reworked the NOC activation system to make it compartmentalized and totally off the record. Director-level briefings only happen for major operations, and even then it’s done in such a way that I am never directly told that we’re using an NOC operative.”

“Plausible deniability is a beautiful thing.” Benson grinned, swiping at the air to kill the heaviness in the room if not in himself. “Anyway, it’s too late to call Scarlet off now. Besides, Martin knows how these things work. We have to let it play out.”

Paige frowned. “What do you mean by *these things*? You’ve seen something this crazy before?”

Benson took a slow breath, turned his attention from the softly groaning Kaiser to the deeply frowning Paige. “Earlier you asked me what Darkwater was, and I said you’ll have your

answer soon.” He let that coyote smile ease onto his face now.

“Well, here it is, Paige. This is Darkwater. Are you in or out?”

“John, what the hell are you—” Kaiser started to say.

Benson cut him off sharply. “Let her answer, Martin. You know damn well what needs to happen next, and it can only happen with Darkwater.”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking,” Paige said hesitantly.

“Darkwater ... it’s that off-the-books team you set up after leaving the CIA, isn’t it? Ice Wagner is one of yours, isn’t he?”

A frown cut a V down the front of her face again. “But I’m still not following. You said *This is Darkwater*. What does that even mean? What is *this*?”

“All of it.” Benson spread his arms out wide. “All of what’s happening here is Darkwater. And you’ve been drawn into it just like I have, just like Ice and Indy have, just like Rhett and Scarlet, just like Martin and Alice.”

“Enough, John. You’re done talking.” Kaiser stepped in front of Benson, turned towards Paige, then crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at her. “Forget him. We’re going to close this out my way.” He nodded once briskly. “All right, so we can’t get to Scarlet via the NOC system. So let’s find a way to get O’Donnell and Wagner safely back to the

States ASAP. I don't want anyone else getting killed on this clusterfuck. Not O'Donnell. Not Wagner. Not Scarlet. Not Rhett. These people have all served our country, and we aren't going to just sit back and *let it play out* like it's some game."

"It *is* a game, Martin. It's *all* a game, just like life and death is a game. You damn well know it, because you're damn well playing it." Benson stood abruptly, strode around Kaiser, turned and squared his shoulders, his wolf-eyes blazing with challenge. "Why did you call me when this O'Donnell thing popped up on your radar? If you're so sick of my *games*, why the *fuck* did you pull Darkwater into this? Why did you agree to adopt those twins after the Fox and Fay mission? Why are you even still listening to me, still allowing me to stand in your damn office when all I've done is been a pain in the ass since starting Darkwater? Why, Martin?"

Kaiser locked his gaze with Benson's for a long tense moment as the questions ricocheted around the room like bullets. From the corner of his locked-in vision Benson could see Paige stiffen, cowering on her chair as the two men squared off like they'd done a thousand times in this lifetime alone.

Finally Kaiser shook his head, exhaled hard, ran his fingers through his hair.

“I don’t know why,” he said quietly to Benson. “I don’t know why I called you in. I don’t know why I agreed to adopt those kids. I don’t know why Alice agreed to come back. I don’t know a damn thing, John. Everything I thought I knew has been turned upside down over these past seven years.” He shook his head, then stared at that framed photograph looking back at him from the bookshelf. “Maybe it is time I stepped down.”

“No, it’s time you stepped *up!*” Benson strode past Kaiser, snatched that photo-frame off the bookshelf, held it up to Kaiser’s damn face. “Do it for them, your new kids, your new family. We’re so close, Martin. We’ve never had a President and First Lady who could unite the country like Robinson and Delilah might do—if they make it to the White House. Hell, they could unite the damn *world* with the sort of power they project—a power that comes from their love.” He backed up a step, shook his head, keeping his gaze locked on the weary-eyed CIA Director. “But they can’t use that power without men and women like us standing in the shadows behind them. Like *us*, Martin. Not like Rhett Rodgers. Darkwater is getting

bigger, harnessing more energy, pulling more players into its vortex. I think part of this mission is to clear a path for what we both know is Robinson and Delilah's destiny, my and your destiny, maybe even America's destiny. We can't turn away from this. You have to let it play out."

Kaiser blinked twice, his face darkening as he sucked in a breath. "What are you saying, John?"

"You know what I'm saying." Benson's gaze turned cold. He glanced at Paige, then back at Kaiser. "There's going to be no evidence gathering, no suspension, no heads-up to Robinson, no *pending investigation*. There's only one way this ends."

Kaiser snorted. "I cannot and will not authorize a hit on a high-ranking CIA man. And just to be clear—*you* will not authorize any such action either with Darkwater."

"That's not what I'm asking. All I'm asking is to let it play out."

Kaiser sighed. "So what do you suggest we do?"

Benson grinned. "Nothing. We do nothing at all."

Kaiser's eyebrows twitched. He shook his head in exasperation but said nothing—no words of acceptance but

none of refusal either.

He was on the edge, so Benson went in for the kill. “Right now Rhett knows we’ve got Paige in your office. He can’t be certain she’ll hold up, that she won’t flip on him. He might be confident that she’ll stay loyal, but there’ll be some doubt.”

Benson’s eyes flashed. “I want that doubt to eat away at him, force him to make a move, perhaps make a mistake.”

Paige touched her hair and scrunched up her face. “Would it be better if I contact him and pretend like I’m close to breaking? Or maybe assure him that I held up, that you only asked about my relationship with Rhett, not about Indy O’Donnell? We could try to play him. I can help.”

Benson shook his head. “No offence, kid. But you’re still vulnerable when it comes to Rhett. And even if you held up to his charm, the guy can tell if someone’s lying.” He shook his head again, this time with finality. “And if Rhett feels backed into a corner, he might risk getting rid of you anyway, make it look accidental, make your body disappear, make it so that even if we know he did it nobody can prove a damn thing. Sorry. There’s no way I’m letting Rhett Rodgers anywhere near you, kid. You’re under our protection now, and that’s final.”

Paige flushed red through her rouge, then looked down at her hands and nodded, her shoulders slumping in what Benson hoped was relief and not disappointment that she wasn't going to be allowed to see Rhett again.

Benson's gaze lingered on her. He wondered how long it would take for Paige to heal, to recover, to rebuild her confidence, to accept that perhaps what Rhett had awakened in her wasn't all bad, wasn't all a waste, wasn't all for nothing, would perhaps all be used later.

But that was later. This was now. Stay in the present moment, Benson warned himself. Yes, this amorphous thing called Darkwater was expanding like a hurricane gaining power. But what drove each mission was a burning self-contained core of that universal energy in its purest manifestation in the three-dimensional world.

The energy of man and woman.

The energy of love.

This was still Ice and Indy's story, and Benson couldn't let that get away from him. He was being challenged to reach deeper, to go further, to expand his own understanding of these forces that defied articulation, could never be controlled, could never be predicted. But he still had to remain grounded, never



forget that although sex and violence were the twin engines driving the beast, the fuel was love.

“I agree,” came Kaiser’s voice. “With that part, at least. Paige, we’ll put you up at a CIA safe-house until this all gets sorted.”

“Negative.” Benson snapped back to focus. “I meant Darkwater protection. She can’t be connected to the CIA. Rhett might have lost his tech-genius-hacker, but he’s still got access to every law enforcement and intelligence database in the country. You can’t assign CIA agents—or U.S. Marshalls or Secret Service or FBI or even the damn Fire Department.” He blinked twice, then grinned. “In fact this is our chance to *really* rattle Rhett’s cage. We’ll take Paige out of the CIA system entirely.”

Paige frowned. “Get me out of the CIA system? You mean ...”

“I most certainly do.” Benson grinned as that coyote-spirit yipped triumphantly inside the shimmering shell of energy neatly disguised as Benson’s human body. “Your employment with CIA is to be terminated immediately. Phones, email, logins—everything will be cut off. You won’t go anywhere near your apartment until this is over. Rhett will have no idea if you flipped on him and got put into some kind of witness protection or if you actually quit the Agency to protect him or if Kaiser put a damn bullet in your head and tossed you in a landfill.”

Paige blinked about a hundred times. “So I ... I’m being fired? Forced to resign? For real, or just to trick Rhett? I ... I don’t ...”

Kaiser groaned, shot another exasperated look at Benson. “Nobody’s firing anybody, and nobody’s being forced to resign. John, this is not the time for a recruiting sales-pitch.”

“Nobody’s selling a damn thing,” Benson lied. He turned to Paige and shamelessly sold it harder than a 1950s Avon lady. “Look, kid. Like it or not, you’ve been dragged out of

your safe little tech-cubicle and into the arena. Do you really think you can go back into your box in Langley's basement? Darkwater needs a hacker like you. The pay is better. The perks are *way* better. And this mission is just a taste of what Darkwater can spin up. It's deadly, dark, and dangerous. But I know a part of you is drawn to what's deadly, dark, and dangerous. The shadow is awake in you now, and you need to find a way to channel that energy or else it will turn on you. So what do you say, kid?"

Paige stammered under her breath. She glanced wide-eyed at Kaiser.

"Don't look at him," Benson said. "Look at yourself. *Inside* yourself. What do you *feel*, Paige? Close your eyes and ask the question silently to your heart like it's a living breathing truth-machine. Then open your eyes and give us your answer. First thing that comes to mind. First thought, best thought."

Benson held his hand up to silence Kaiser's inevitable protest. Paige blinked rapidly, then gulped, nodded, and closed her eyes.

Thirteen seconds later Paige's eyelids flicked open. She looked around the room like she'd forgotten where she was.

Then she nodded once, her face flushing red like she'd only just understood what she'd agreed to, understood that this simple choice that had bubbled up from her thumping heart was going to send her life down a path that would perhaps be as dark as Indy O'Donnell's.

And that excited her, Benson could tell when he saw the panic give way to a flash of dark thrill, perhaps a split-second vision of what her future had in store.

Kaiser exhaled hard, groaned even harder, then nodded and sat down heavily in his chair. He flipped his laptop open, glanced inquiringly at Paige one last time, then typed out what Benson figured was a quick email to his assistant to mark Paige Anderson as an immediate Voluntary Termination with no further details or annotations.

Kaiser sent off the email, slammed the laptop closed, then leaned back in his swivel and looked up. "All right, John. Once again you've gotten what you wanted. Once again you've suckered me into playing ball in your insane game. So what's the play now?"

Benson ruffled the back of his hair. "The play is to wait for Rhett's play. And that depends on what happens with Scarlet, Ice, and Indy in Mumbai. Paige, what did Rhett want to have

happen when he activated Scarlet? What were her instructions?”

“O’Donnell dead. Wagner left alive.” Paige’s voice carried a new confidence that made Benson smile inwardly. “Enough to make it plausible that Wagner killed her on orders from Kaiser or Benson or both. Once Scarlet completes the hit, Rhett goes to Senator Robinson, shows him the evidence planted on O’Donnell’s phone.”

Kaiser grunted. “And Robinson would ask me about her whereabouts, what I was doing about it, status of the investigation, that sort of thing.” His face hardened. “Of course, soon enough it would come out that she was murdered while in the presence of a Darkwater man. It would look like a conspiracy and cover-up. Not a good look for me and you, John—even with Paige as a witness. Her word against Rhett’s. My reputation against Rhett’s. Could go either way with Robinson—hell, he might decide that he doesn’t want *either* of us as CIA Director when he wins the White House.”

Benson nodded, kept the discussion on point, his focus on Paige. “How would Rhett know if Scarlet succeeds?”

“Scarlet would check back into the NOC database. Her codename would show up in the list of available operators.”

Benson rubbed his jaw. “So right now Rhett is watching that NOC list via his authorized CIA login. And he’s also wondering what the hell you’re telling us in this office right now.” He grinned. “The uncertainty will eat away at Rhett. Then once he sees you’ve suddenly resigned from the CIA and all your phones and emails are deactivated, your apartment empty, he’ll start to worry, get impatient, make a move to close out the game before it eats him alive.”

Kaiser shot a sharp glance at Benson. “What’s that move, you think?”

Benson returned Kaiser’s look. Both veteran CIA men knew exactly what a snake like Rhett Rodgers would do if he was cornered, provoked, trapped.

He’d strike.

“He might come at us.” Kaiser answered his own question, his lips a tight smile, the thrill of the game still alive in him. “Force an endgame in the face of uncertainty.”

Benson nodded, his own eyes shining with that same thrill. “Even more so if he thinks he’s going down. He’ll want revenge before he burns. And if it turns out Paige *didn’t* flip on him—well, then with old Martin Kaiser out of the picture, the path to the corner office in Langley is suddenly wide open.”

“So long as he takes us out with plausible deniability.”

Kaiser couldn't stop a sideways smile from breaking.

Benson didn't even try to stop his own sideways grin.

“Exactly. So maybe we give him an opportunity to do just that. Nudge him along the path to his endgame. What do you think, Martin? I know you're a new father again. I know you're trying this marriage thing a second time. And I know damn well that Alice will turn psycho-killer on me if you get even a scratch on your pinky toe. But—”

“I'm in,” snapped Kaiser. “What do you have in mind?”

Benson tapped the cleft in his chin as he thought. Then he raised an eyebrow. “Senator Robinson and his family are out on the campaign trail. His townhouse is empty. Secret Service protection hasn't been approved for him yet, and he just ordered me to pull Darkwater out of there. He's asked you to replace the Darkwater guys with some Agency guys in civvies, right?”

Kaiser nodded slowly, left eyebrow raised.

Benson continued. “So why don't you pass that assignment on to Rhett Rodgers? And since Darkwater has been on site at the Robinson home for months, schedule a meeting with all three of us at the empty townhome to discuss security strategy.

Debrief on what we've learned. Changing of the guard kind of thing. Late tomorrow evening." Benson grinned. "Rhett's no idiot. He'll see right through it. But I know how his mind works. He'll also see it as an opportunity. Maybe even a challenge. Besides, he still can't be certain how much Paige told us, how much we believe, how much we can prove. Either way, set up the meeting and see if he accepts."

Kaiser ran his fingers through his hair, his cheekbones darkening with color, his eyes signaling that he knew exactly what Benson was suggesting.

A moment later Paige signaled that she had also damn well figured out what Benson was suggesting.

"Oh, my God," she gasped, jumping up from her chair. "You're trying to bait Rhett by giving him a chance to kill both of you at once. You want to draw him into some kind of confrontation, maybe provoke him so ... so you can justify taking *him* out!"

Benson smiled coolly, shrugged with deadly nonchalance. "We're just setting the board, kid. Each player makes his own choices. Rhett comes at us, we hit back. If he stands down ... well, then nothing happens tomorrow night. His play. His move. His choice. Don't look at us like that. This is how the



game is played, kid.” He waited for Paige to settle down, then sighed and relaxed in his chair. “Anyway, it all depends on what happens in Mumbai. If Scarlet doesn’t check back in by tomorrow night’s meeting, Rhett is going to be very tempted to make his move on us there.”

Paige closed her eyes and shook her head, muttering under her breath like she was trying desperately to convince herself there was at least some moral high ground available in that room. “What if Scarlet *does* check back in? What if she *does* kill O’Donnell—kill her own daughter? For the *second* time. Without even *knowing* it! And Rhett doesn’t know it either!” She pulled at her ponytail, shook her head again. “This is too much to swallow. I still can’t believe that Rhett, Scarlet, and Indy are all connected in this crazy way but they don’t even *know* it! How can that possibly just ... *happen*? Each of them thinks the other is dead, and now I’m supposed to believe they just *coincidentally* got pulled into this operation?”

Benson shrugged. “Believe what you want. Just remember what they teach every CIA recruit at the Farm: Sometimes things look like conspiracies when in fact they’re coincidences. You have all the facts, Paige. *You* brought up O’Donnell’s name to Rhett after seeing her position paper. *You*

pulled up Scarlet's name in the NOC database. These were *your* choices, so unless you think somebody hypnotized you and CIA is testing some cool new mind-control tech on your genius brain, you know that it's not a conspiracy. Hell, simple mathematics says it's too complex to be a conspiracy. Which means that calling it a conspiracy is actually the crazier conclusion."

Paige closed her eyes and moved her lips like she was counting to ten or perhaps reciting the alphabet backwards to make sure she wasn't drugged. "All right," she finally said. "But even if I accept that it just played out this way, I can't accept that we're going to sit here and do nothing to help Ice and Indy in Mumbai."

Benson looked up calmly. "Every player makes their own choice, Paige. Ice and Indy chose to cut off contact with me. Now they're going to have to live with that choice." He shrugged with feigned indifference, curious to see how much Paige understood about Darkwater, about fate, about destiny. About him. "Or die with that choice, as the case may be."

Paige stopped her pacing, whipped her body around, her face drawn with shock. "You ... you're insane," she

whispered. “Both of you. Ice and Indy are sitting ducks there in Mumbai.”

“Hardly.” Benson smiled thinly at her, hoping to hell he was right. “Ice Wagner is a Delta killer with a woman to protect. *His* woman to protect. This is the core of Darkwater’s energy, Paige. This is what puts the game in motion, and it’s what pulls everything to a close.” Benson took a slow breath, debating whether to reassure Paige or pull back the curtain even further.

He chose the latter.

“Don’t mistake my calmness for certainty,” Benson said softly. “We can’t be sure exactly how the curtain closes on this drama, can’t say for sure whether it’s a tragedy or a romance. Either way, you’ve got a front row seat. All you can do now is watch and wonder, listen and learn, wait for your turn.”

Paige frowned at Benson’s last turn of phrase, but was either too confused to acknowledge it or too worked up to question it. “Well, maybe we should tell Rhett that Indy is his daughter. Maybe it softens his heart.”

“He had his chance thirty years ago.” Benson’s gaze was cold stone now. “And trust me, kid, I don’t think he’s softened after thirty years in the shadows getting better at being a cold-

blooded snake. If anything, Rhett would use that knowledge to make things look even worse for Kaiser and me.”

“Oh, because you lied about his daughter being dead and then blackmailed him into becoming a CIA assassin?” Paige rolled her eyes, huffed out a breath. “Why would that make you look bad, Benson? Isn’t it just how the *game is played*?” She shook her head in disgust. “You guys are *all* snakes. One worse than the other.”

Benson grinned wickedly, flicked his gaze at Kaiser. “I think she’s finally getting it, Martin.” He looked back at Paige, his gaze hardening just enough to send a message. “You’re free to walk away from the game anytime, kid. Choices. Choices. Choices. You want your job back? You want to go back to Rhett? You want to sit here and pretend like you don’t see the difference between us and him? You want to pretend like what you’re seeing here isn’t beautiful, mysterious, magical? You’re not a helpless player in this game, Paige. You have the power to choose, so go ahead and do it.”

Paige rubbed her eyes, sat back down in her chair, bent forward and covered her face. She hyperventilated into her palms, then looked up and exhaled hard. “You know I’ve already made my choice. I’m just ... just struggling to come to

terms with it. I know how to calculate probabilities, so I get what you said about how coincidence is often more likely than conspiracy.” She shook her head. “But the part about what happened thirty years ago with Indy O’Donnell ... I still don’t know how to square that with what I believe about life and death. And it’s not that I don’t believe in the afterlife or something more than just physical reality. I’ve seen studies about near-death experiences, about people leaving their bodies and then coming back. I’ve seen research suggesting there might be something like a soul or spirit. But what I don’t get is that even if there is such a thing, why would that poor unwanted twice-murdered child’s soul *want* to come back to this life?”

“Don’t you see?” Benson’s smile hardened, his voice dropped to a cold whisper. “Same reason Rhett and Scarlet wanted to send that soul away from this life. It’s what bound those three together. It’s what brought them together again. And it’s what dragged that child’s soul back into its little body. Unfinished business. That’s why it came back not once but twice. Unfinished fucking business.”

Paige frowned, then her eyes lit with dark realization. “You think Indy O’Donnell came back twice for ... for ...

*revenge?”*

Benson shrugged lazily. “She’s Rhett and Scarlet’s daughter. Sometimes fate is burned into the flesh, destiny boiled into the blood. She is their spawn, carries something of Rhett and Scarlet in not just her body but her soul.” His face tightened into a smile. “And if that’s the case, Indy O’Donnell didn’t come back to forgive. She didn’t come back to love. She came back to *avenge*.” The smile faded now, his eyes misting over as he turned his mind to Mumbai, to the game unfolding in a hotel room ten thousand miles away. “I wonder when Indy O’Donnell will figure that out about herself, about her own shadow. I wonder when she’ll learn how to use the beautiful dark energy burning in that angry little infant, buried deep inside its violent little soul. Inside *her* soul.”

Because that’s the only way this game ends well, Benson thought as he turned away from the stunned Paige and fixed his mind on what was to come.

That gnawing anxiety made Benson shift in his seat again. He glanced at his watch, calculating ahead as he tried to predict the future.

Of course, the future was just a set of probabilistic potentials vibrating in the quantum field, waiting for the

players to make their moves, choices that would collapse the wave into particles known as physical reality, the ephemeral infinite manifesting as concrete events within time and space.

Benson couldn't predict that outcome for certain, but he could damn well sense those probabilities like dark storm clouds gathering above them all.

Some carrying the sweet rain of relief.

Others hiding the sharp hail of horror.

## MEANWHILE, IN MUMBAI.

Horror descended on Indy as she listened.

Not to the dying woman's blood-soaked whispers but to her own heart.

A heart which was humming gently behind her breastbone, beating with a steady pulsing rhythm that seemed at odds with what Indy thought she should be feeling, thought she *was* feeling.

She distinctly remembered her heart almost exploding in her chest at Ice's urgent call to shoot, dammit, just shoot. She'd scrambled across the bed with drug-fueled desperation, grabbed her service weapon off the side-table, then turned and shot at the hazy hallucinatory figure beyond the bedroom door.

Yes, her heart had been pounding erratically then, hammering inside her as she stumbled to the bedroom door and looked through it and saw what appeared to be the very same woman from Indy's waking-dream lying on the carpet and spewing blood from her mouth, snorting blood from her



nostrils, oozing blood from her breast, her left breast, that same left breast which Indy had seen—no, *felt*—just moments ago as she lay in that big bed, burrowed into Ice’s big body, lost in the bigness of it all, the vastness of it all, the madness of it all.

“We have to go, Indy.” Ice was pulling her off the woman now, the woman she was certain was her mother even though of course it wasn’t her mother, couldn’t be her mother, couldn’t be anything but a druggie delusion, a hallucinatory hologram. “I’ve got all our stuff. Get your shoes on. We’re leaving. Now, Indy. Right fucking now.”

“But ...” Indy started to say as Ice ripped her away from her mother’s arms, dragged her to her feet. “Did you hear what she just said, Ice? Did you hear all that? About Benson, about ... about *me*! She has the same memory that I just told you about, Ice. How can that be? Oh, hell, I’m losing it, Ice. Did she really say all that or am I hearing things?”

“I don’t fucking know.” Ice held her steady in his arms as they both looked down at the petite fifty-something woman in a blood-drenched hotel staff uniform looking up at them—no, not them but her, looking at Indy, looking *into* Indy, the broken woman somehow hanging on to life like she was waiting for

something, couldn't leave without hearing something, without feeling something, without saying something, something more than the outpouring of garbled thirty-year-old history that Indy could barely remember even though she'd taken it all in, recorded it all in some functional-but-inaccessible part of her brain, storing it with mechanical efficiency, a written record to be perused later.

"She's saying something, Ice." Indy wrenched herself out of his grip, got down on her knees, leaned close to the woman again as that terrifyingly certain recognition made her head spin worse than any drug ever could. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry," came the blood-throated whisper through pleading, trembling lips, pain-glazed eyes showing a tortured soul yearning for its final release, begging to be set free. "Will you forgive me?"

*No*, came the coldly silent, violently sudden, darkly shocking answer from somewhere inside Indy. *No*.

A single word that exploded like a gunshot from some cold dark part of Indy that she didn't know existed, still wasn't sure existed, couldn't possibly exist because it wasn't her, couldn't be her, *shouldn't* be her.

Indy tried to fight it back, beat it down, repress it right back to its dark hiding place in her sickeningly steady heart. She tried to smile, tried to nod, tried to say yes, sure, of course I forgive you, no harm done, so what if you smothered me against your poisonous breast, so what if you came back to finish the fucking job thirty years later, so what if I was just an inconvenience, a tool, a prop in your play. No worries Mama, it's cool Mommy, totally awesome to say you're sorry now that you're dying, to beg like perhaps I begged as you smothered me to death, as I wondered what I had done wrong in the first few minutes of my new life, yeah, absolutely reasonable that now when you're dying like the murderous bitch you've always been and suddenly want fucking *forgiveness* so you can get into the kingdom of heaven I should just smile and say yes Mama, all right Mama, go with God mama, you're forgiven Mama, you're free Mama, don't let that pesky guilt weigh you down Mama, I love you Mama, I hate you Mama, damn you Mama, damn you to hell Mama.

Indy convulsed like she'd been electrocuted, her eyes almost popping out of their sockets, her tongue almost choking her with its venom, her thoughts indistinguishable from barbs of exhilarating viciousness pricking up from every speck of consciousness in her mind and body, heart and soul.

Indy tried to find her way back, but she couldn't even see straight. Her vision was a psychedelic mass of black-red spirals and purple-yellow spinners and ugly blue-green tendrils moving like snakes doing a death-dance inside her head. She tried to tell herself it was the drug, just the drug, that it would wear off and she'd see that this woman wasn't her mother and the venom wasn't her own and all of it was just frenzied fabrication, manufactured madness, imagined images, erroneous emotions.

But Indy couldn't break away, couldn't turn away, was locked in by an overwhelming darkness that was unconscionably natural, disgustingly delicious, perversely pleasurable, lusciously liberating, like it was something she'd always carried in her, something unborn that was finally breaking through to fresh air, to freedom.

"Leave her." Ice's voice sounded like distant thunder rolling through the storm-clouds of her mind. "We're leaving in thirty seconds. I'll call down for emergency medics. They might get here in time to save her. But we need to be gone before then. Leave her, Indy. She's not your damn mother. We're both out of our minds on a psychotropic drug right now. None of this is what it seems. It ... it *can't* be."

It can't be but it is, Indy thought as that strange unsettling calmness oozed through her like a snake uncoiling itself within her heart, its dark oily scales moving smooth and silent as it came alive within her soul, its length stretching across eons of time, fathoms of space, connecting past and future into one infinite stream of clarifying insight.

Now her spiral-spectacles cleared up just enough to see Ice furiously clearing the room. He was collecting the broken bits of what looked like his phone. He'd grabbed his knife and sunglasses and all the weapons and the single shell-casing from the solitary shot she'd fired. He disappeared into the bathroom, presumably to check if they'd left anything behind.

Just the real world, Indy thought as she turned her attention back to that woman waiting to leave the real world. That's all we've left behind, Ice. The real world.

And what I thought was me.

Because right now there's someone else alive in me.

An angry child.

A furious fetus.

A rugrat seeking retribution.

Darkness swept over Indy like a wave, and before she understood what was happening she was already doing it, reaching out with those tiny little fingers that were once powerless, that little girl's rage seething inside Indy as she placed her left hand over Mama's mouth, pinched Mama's nostrils closed with the fingers of her right hand, rested her vengeful little baby head against Mama's torn left breast.

And waited.

She waited for conscience to stop her, but it didn't.

She waited for horror to halt her, but it wouldn't.

She waited for morality to move her, but it couldn't.

"You can't," came the voice from behind her, above her, around her, within her. "You can't, Indy."

It was Ice, and he was on his knees behind her, his body enveloping hers, his hands prying hers away from Mama's face, his heart hammering against her back and sending shockwaves of desperate warmth through Indy's heart, chasing away that coldness, drowning that darkness, bringing her back to someplace where she could breathe again, feel again, see again.

Love again.

And now conscience cut through Indy like a blade. Now horror hit her like a hammer. Now morality moved her like magic.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered, curling her blood-stained fingers into fists as she convulsed in horror, shuddered in shame, floundered like a lost animal, shivered like a scared child. “What have I done? Oh, Ice, what have I—”

“She’s still alive,” Ice whispered against her ear, still holding her firmly against his body, shielding her from the shock of her own emotions. “But she won’t be for long if we don’t get the medics in here, probably not even if we do. Either way, we need to move, Indy. Now.”

“No,” came Mama’s whisper. She tried to raise her head, but only managed to cough out a mouthful of thick blood. “Finish it. Please. Finish it.”

Indy stared, blinked, stiffened in Ice’s arms, then relaxed against Ice’s body. “I can’t,” she said softly, gently, carefully, lovingly. “I won’t. I didn’t deserve to die like that. But neither do you. You wanted my forgiveness, and you’ll have it, Mama. Not now. Maybe not for a long time.” She nestled into Ice’s big silent body, gazed down into her mother’s dimming eyes. “But I’ll get there someday, Mama.”

Indy blinked, and now she felt warm tears gather in her eyes, sensed warm love gather in her heart.

Not love for this woman dying before her but for the child dying inside her, the child who'd been trapped in that dying moment for thirty years, perhaps thirty lifetimes.

Ice was silent behind her, holding her close but not pulling her away, like he sensed that something was coming to a close, something was being released, something lost had been found, something malignant had been extracted.

“Thank you,” said Mama, her eyelids heavy now, her voice barely a whisper, her blood almost black without oxygen, but her eyes somehow bright with hope. She took a rasping breath, somehow managed an almost playful smile. “Tell Benson I’ll be waiting for him in hell.”

Now suddenly everything came rushing back to Indy. Everything this woman had sputtered out in a muddled mass of words that were recorded somewhere in Indy’s mind.

She felt Ice stiffen behind her, like perhaps he’d heard all that garbled information and had locked it away in his own drug-enhanced brain, was reviewing it again after Benson’s name triggered its release.



“Ice, did you hear what she—” Indy started to say as Ice got to his feet behind her, pulling her up along with him, steadying her so she could step into her shoes. “She said—“

“I heard her.” Ice held Indy until she got her shoes laced up, then he grabbed his black duffel, scanned the room one more time, finally went for the hotel phone and snatched it up.

Then he dropped the receiver back in the cradle.

Indy frowned. Then she followed his grim gaze.

“Oh,” Indy managed to say when she saw the stillness surrounding Mama’s peaceful body like a shroud. “Oh, Ice ...”

She felt that nausea rise up like a serpent, but Ice had her by the waist and he was leading her out the front door. They stumbled out into the hallway, and just as Indy opened her mouth to speak she felt Ice’s arm tighten around her waist, his warm breath rustling her hair as he spoke.

“Don’t,” he warned with a confident authority that she desperately needed right now before she unraveled, before she tumbled down that one-way street to guilt and self-loathing, to questioning whether she was a murderer and a monster. “She came here to kill us. To kill *you*. I told you to shoot, and you did what you had to do, what you’re trained to do. We’d both

be dead right now if you hadn't. You did the right thing, the best thing, the only thing. And right now you need to keep it together, Indy."

"Easy for you to say." Indy somehow managed to stay upright as Ice pulled her towards the elevators. "You didn't just kill your own mother."

The elevator dinged and the doors opened and Ice dragged her into the empty metal box and punched the button marked LOBBY.

Cold metallic silence enveloped them as the silver doors closed, sealing them into what felt like a time capsule, a spaceship, a portal to a different dimension, a gateway to a greater reality.

"No, I didn't just kill my mother," came Ice's voice echoing off the cold steel walls. "Well, not just now, at least." He looked at her strangely, and behind his wired eyes she could see the drug ripping pathways through his brain, tearing down walls in his mind, busting open vaults in his psyche just like it had in hers.

Indy frowned as the elevator kept spinning deeper into space, further back in time. The drug made her giggle suddenly, but not because anything was funny. "What does

that mean? You didn't kill your mother *just now* but maybe you did some time ago? Did you mean to say that?"

Ice stared at her, his lips tight like a wire. His throat moved as he swallowed. His eyes stayed unblinking and wide.

Now his lips slowly parted as if something was forcing its way out, but just then the elevator bumped to a halt and the word LOBBY flashed on the little screen and as the doors started to open Ice slid those sunglasses back over his eyes and grabbed her arm and led her out into the bustling lobby like he couldn't fucking wait to flee the past, get as far away from his own mind as he could, run like hell from whatever seemed to be hunting him down from the inside, from the dark depths of his own madness, the infinite pit of his own insanity.

And all Indy could think was OK get it together, keep it together, don't lose your shit, don't come undone.

Yes, she damn well needed to keep it together, Indy ordered herself with an almost manic forcefulness. She couldn't allow herself to unravel like she almost had up there.

Because up there was so far away now, so long ago now. She'd discarded something heavy up there in that hotel room, excised a cancer in the operating theater in the clouds, rescued an abandoned child, released a tortured mother.

And along with it had left behind any excuse to fall apart again.

No, she couldn't fall apart now.

She needed to hold it together.

Not so much for herself anymore.

But for him.

Do it for her, Ice told himself as the elevator door opened and let in the chaos of a bustling lobby in Mumbai's finest hotel. Keep it together for Indy. She thinks she just killed her mother, and hell, from what that dead woman was saying, maybe she *was* Indy's mother.

No, you can't trust a damn thing you see or hear, Ice told himself feverishly as he kept his arm firmly wrapped around Indy's waist. Yes, that woman mumbled something about Benson, but that doesn't mean she's Indy's mother. It only means Benson is a damn liar, a snake in the grass, a dog in the manger, a wolf in a suit, a coyote pretending to be a man.

"What are we going to do, Ice?" came her voice in a far-too-loud whisper, her mouth way too close to Ice's neck, her scent breathtakingly intoxicating, her body exhilaratingly warm against his.

Ice gulped back what had bubbled up from the depths of his memory in that elevator. Indy had seemed close to losing her mind about the ridiculously impossible, definitely delusional scene in that hotel room, but she seemed better

now. Good, because chances were pretty good that Indy didn't kill her own mother in that room.

But the whole thing triggered something in Ice, something that had been sitting quietly in the shadows of his memory, waiting for a chance to pounce, waiting for a crack in his psychic armor, a crack wide enough to lob that guilt-grenade into his consciousness, remind him that maybe Ice had done what Indy only suspected she had:

Killed his own Mama.

Papa too.

Not with a gun or a knife.

Not with a bomb or bullets.

With words and choices.

With emotions and feelings.

He'd never taken any of that woo-woo crap seriously back then, never *really* believed that emotional cuts could manifest as physical wounds, that unresolved feelings could fester into flesh-and-blood symptoms, that traumas of the mind could someday become tumors of the body.

But right now Ice didn't know *what* to believe.

So he pulled Indy closer, tightening his grip around her waist with a desperation not just to protect her but to protect himself, not just to save her but to save himself, not just to help her keep it together but to stop himself from coming undone, unwinding like a spring coiled too tight for too fucking long, erupting from deep inside like a geyser blowing through bedrock, years of pressure creating cracks in the psychological crust that had protected Ice from his own guilt, his own rage, his own shame.

It was all coming out.

“We have to get out of the country,” Ice managed to say through gritted teeth as he flashed a tense smile at an earnest hotel staffer whose only job seemed to be to stand at attention and nod his grinning head like a toy clown at each guest walking through the ornate hotel lobby.

And there were a lot of guests. Too many. Any one of them could be another assassin. Fuck, you need to get out of here, Ice told himself as he felt the LSD rising to its fever-pitch peak, get *her* out of here, move, dammit, but not too fast, not too slow.

Hell, were they moving too fast or too slow, Ice wondered with a manic drug-fueled grin plastered on his face. He

adjusted his sunglasses, guided Indy to the big glass sliding doors that swished back and forth, letting in slashes of red-gold morning sunlight that looked like laser beams of hellfire somehow coming from the heavens.

“Out of the country? Now? Like this?” Indy had that same manic grin plastered on her pretty face, her eyes bulging like marbles as they stepped out into the maddening morning sun. “Oh, it burns, Ice,” she giggled as she tried to squint but couldn’t because the muscles around her eyes were twitching like little dancing dolls.

Ice snatched off his shades and gave them to her. Then in a swift smooth motion he slung the glowing pulsing duffel off his shoulder, unzipped what he hoped to hell was the correct side-pocket, dug into it, then exhaled in exhilarated relief when his buzzing fingers closed around an identical pair of Wayfarer shades.

“OK, we totally look like two druggie American tourists,” Indy giggle-muttered as she adjusted the shades which were far too big for her face. “Which, of course, we are.”

Ice flashed a grin as they walked arm-in-arm away from the swishy sliding doors and towards a long line of black-and-yellow taxicabs. He shook his head vigorously at the



welcoming taxi-drivers who were standing beside their boxy little cars like grinning footmen ready to hoist their valued passengers into waiting chariots.

It was like they'd snapped into a totally different reality again. The hotel room and its darkness suddenly seemed so far away that Ice would have sworn under oath that it had never happened, didn't exist, wasn't just a different life but a different reality, had happened to someone else.

One look at Indy's grinning mug and Ice knew she was along for the ride. The morning sun had pulled them out of that dark place, a place that now seemed too ridiculous to be real.

"You all right?" Ice's grin settled to a steady smile as his mind snapped into vivid focus, his acid-enhanced brain rearranging itself to open up all those pathways created from years of Delta training designed to handle overwhelming stress.

Indy nodded furiously, the sunglasses clearly giving her a sense of security, taking the edge off the paranoia that anyone looking into her eyes would immediately tell she was on something.

“Yes, even though I shouldn’t be all right.” Indy touched her mouth, gasping as if she’d only just realized she was grinning like an idiot. “Oh, my God. I can’t believe just a few minutes ago we were in that hotel room and ... and ...”

“Don’t,” Ice said urgently, slipping his arm around her waist again. “This drug will take you wherever you point it. It’s a psychological weapon, and like any weapon it can save you or destroy you.”

Indy huffed out a breath, nodding earnestly like one of those lobby-standing staffers. “The *Times* did a feature last month about how some of these psychedelic drugs are being used to treat PTSD, cure addictions, help victims of physical and emotional violence overcome their trauma.”

“Yeah, but only in small doses.” Ice shrugged uncomfortably. His parents had said the same thing a decade ago after that traumatically trippy Thanksgiving which seemed to have an eerily clear connecting line to the here and now, perhaps linking every event in Ice’s life that led up to the here and now—the cancer, quitting the Army to move back home, going back to West Point to teach, meeting John Benson. “This was *not* a small dose.”

Indy gulped back a giggle. “Well, it’s probably half the dose Scarlet intended for me alone.”

Ice frowned. “Scarlet?”

Indy gulped again. This time it wasn’t a giggle. “You must not have heard everything the woman said before dying. She said her codename was Scarlet. She said Benson gave her that name when he put her into the NOC program.”

Ice’s frown cut deeper. He stopped abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk, cocked his head in her direction, tried to get a read on whether Indy was close to tumbling back down to that dark place, whether she was pointing this weaponized drug in the wrong direction.

She looked back at him through her big sunglasses, shrugging with controlled calmness. “I’m all right,” she said, the words tumbling out rapidly. “I mean, my mind is flying like a pig with wings, my vision is a swirling mass of laser beams and surrealist paintings, my tongue feels like a rubber snake in my mouth, and you look like the abominable snowman melting in the sun.” She snorted out a giggle. “But now that I know what’s happening to me, I can handle it. There’s nothing to do but ride it out, right? There’s no antidote, no quick fix, no stopping this, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Ice cracked a relieved—if slightly psychotic—smile. “Can’t just drink a cup of coffee and sober up. We’re on this train until the last stop.”

“Got it.” Indy scrunched up her face. “So what’s the next stop on the crazy train?”

Ice rubbed his stubble, which felt stiff like straw beneath his squishy fingerpads. “We need to get out of the country ASAP. Didn’t have time to wipe down the room, so eventually our fingerprints will get picked up. They’ll get a hit on my alias from when I entered the country yesterday. I assume you got fingerprinted by the Indian authorities to get diplomatic clearance to be stationed at the Embassy?”

Indy nodded, rubbed her chin with the back of her hand, rolled her tongue over her lips like she was fascinated by how she tasted.

Ice gulped back a sudden urge to taste her too. He reminded himself that this drug was like a guided missile, so he better be careful where he pointed that thing.

“Point the way.” Indy was chewing her lips like they were gummy worms. “Airport? Bus station? Seaport? Flying saucer launchpad? Wheeeoow!”

Ice chuckled. “Simmer down, Spacegirl.” He patted his cargo flaps, then groaned. “Oh, right. I smashed my Darkwater phone.”

Indy smacked his chest with the back of her hand. “I noticed that back at the room. Why?”

Ice rubbed the back of his neck. “Decided I couldn’t trust Benson. Didn’t want him listening. Didn’t want him tracking us.” He shrugged, then nodded firmly. “Which was probably wise—if what that woman said about him is true.”

“Scarlet.”

Ice blinked behind his shades. The name triggered another name. One that Benson had mentioned on the phone before everything got turned upside down and inside out.

“Rhett Rodgers.” Ice gulped back a rush of something he hoped was just the drug making random connections that wouldn’t hold up under the clear light of sobriety. “*Scarlet* and *Rhett*? Coincidence, you think?” He tried to grin, but that rush of random realization choked the smile off his lips. “Wait, not just that. It’s *Scarlet*, *Rhett*, and ... and *India*.”

Indy let out a puzzled laugh. “What are you going on about? Didn’t peg you for a *Gone with the Wind* fanatic.”

“I’m not.” Ice shook his head, hoping something had rattled loose and would fall back into place. It didn’t. In fact more things came loose and rattled around in the squirming coils of his brain-folds. “But Benson is a fan. Or was, thirty years ago. Rhett Rodgers. You know that name?”

Indy shrugged. “Sounds vaguely familiar, yeah. He’s one of the assistant director types at Langley, I think. Fairly high up in the Agency, if I remember right.” She cocked her head now. “Why?”

“Benson mentioned him earlier. Rhett Rodgers might be the guy who set you up.” He took a breath, let it out as calmly as he could even as the drug burned in his brain, the randomness ripped through his reasoning mind, making connections that he wished to hell would turn out to be nonsense. “Which means Rhett sent Scarlet after us.”

Indy cocked her head the other way like a surprised sparrow. “Wait, someone named Rhett activated someone named Scarlet to kill someone named India? What is this, the script for a middle-school play in suburban Atlanta?”

Ice chuckled, rubbed the back of his head. “You ever worked for Rhett Rodgers?”

Indy shook her head.

“Ever met him?” Ice felt the questions bubbling up like hot vapors from a simmering volcano. “Maybe at some CIA social event or conference or even in the hallway at Langley, at the water cooler, the coffee machine, the damn parking lot? Think, dammit, Indy.”

Indy took a hurried step back away from him. Ice realized he'd raised his voice, that passers-by were passing curious looks. He exhaled in embarrassment, then led Indy off to the side of the busy sidewalk, where a sun-crusted old man was brewing an enormous metal vat of milky-sweet tea on a kerosene stove. Ice held up two fingers to the tea-man, then plonked his duffel down on a long wooden bench which appeared to be the extent of the tea-shop's seating options.

“No,” Indy whispered, touching her hair and shaking her head. “Never met Rhett Rodgers. Don't even know what he looks like.” She shrugged nervously, glanced self-consciously at the curiously staring tea-man, then smiled wide when he handed them two paper cups of steaming hot tea. She sipped hers and smacked her lips. “Why would he set me up? It can't be personal, I don't think. It's probably just opportunistic. Right person, right place, right time.” She took another sip, then shrugged. “Or wrong person, right place, right time.

Something like that. You know what I mean.” She shrugged again. “Anyway, Scarlet is a codename. And Rhett is a real name. Both are pretty common American names. Especially in the South. Just a coincidence that the names line up that way.”

“Except maybe it’s not a damn coincidence.” Ice blew on his tea, muttered out the names again, sipped the sweet tea which was hot and milky and damn good. “Benson has this weird OCD-type thing with lining up names.”

“What do you mean? Like how?”

Ice shrugged, took another sip, glanced off into the distance as it occurred to him that *Ice* and *Indy* matched up well, lined up great, fed Benson’s coyote compulsions perfectly. Ice had noticed it earlier, dismissed it with the same scoffing carelessness with which he’d always dismissed Mom and Dad’s hippie-hugging nonsense. But dammit, right now with his brain running sideways through psychedelia, those connections seemed irritatingly meaningful.

“Never mind,” he said gruffly, draining his teacup and tossing it into a blue plastic receptacle near the bench. He dragged his duffel closer, patted the sidepockets, found the right one, unzipped it and pulled out a plastic-wrapped flip



phone. “Let’s hope Benson doesn’t have a bead on my backup burner.”

Ice unwrapped the package, slid the SIM card into the phone, snapped the battery into place, then took a breath and turned it on. Indy’s CIA-issued phone was in his duffel too—dismantled, of course—but using that was even riskier because Rhett Rodgers would be able to track that along with Benson and Kaiser and every other spook with access to the system. Very unlikely Benson knew about this phone—not unless he really did have X-ray spectacles and a mind-reading brain-implant.

“Checking your Social feeds?” Indy snuggled against his arm, playfully peeking at the little screen where Ice had pulled up the clunky old-fashioned browser. “How many likes did you get for your cookie recipe?”

Ice almost choked on his tongue to stop himself from exploding into violent laughter. Indy buried her face into his arm, snickering wildly into him.

“Your lame jokes are more dangerous than any CIA assassin,” he grumbled. “I think I just had a mini-stroke.”

Indy grinned up at him. “You sure it wasn’t just a brain-fart?”

“Are you regressing back to childhood?” Ice almost bit his tongue to stop the very unwise crack. He felt Indy stiffen momentarily, but then she was peering at his phone screen inquisitively again. Clearly she was understanding how to control this weapon of a drug.

And that sparked an idea—which Ice quickly dismissed as far too dangerous. Besides, they needed to get moving. They were too conspicuous in their current condition to hang out at sidewalk cafes and made dangerously bad jokes.

“Flight schedules?” Indy frowned. “We can’t get on an international flight in this condition. Besides, I don’t have my passport on me. And both of us might get stopped at the airport anyway—your alias is compromised, and my name could get flagged the moment the Mumbai police find my prints in that hotel room.”

She stiffened again against Ice’s arm. He looked up from the phone long enough to cast a reassuring glance into her shaded eyes. She nodded quickly, mouthed *I’m OK* silently, then stuck her tongue out at him and wiggled it about.

Ice grinned, then got back to his annoyingly slow web-browsing. “The DO NOT DISTURB sign is still on the door. We haven’t checked out yet. Nobody’s going in there for a

while, so we're probably safe from the Mumbai Police for a few hours at least." He grunted when a list of international flights popped up on the tiny screen. "Local authorities won't have our passports flagged yet, but both Benson and Rhett will be watching flight manifests for our names. I'd bet my ballsack on that."

Indy giggled wickedly. "I'll take that bet," she whispered. "And raise you a ... wait, what's the female equivalent of a ballsack?" She furrowed her brow, then shrugged. "I'll raise you two ovaries, I guess."

Ice raised his left eyebrow, then shook his head. "I'll pass."

Indy gasped. "Ohmygod, you don't want my ovaries?"

Ice gave her a stern look. "I warned you about weaponizing the lameness of your jokes."

"Oh, and your ballsack isn't a weapon?" Indy glared at him. "I seem to remember being assaulted by aforementioned ballsack earlier today."

"That was yesterday," Ice corrected. "Get your facts about my ballsack straight, woman. Besides, I referred to your joke—not your ovaries—as the weapon." He grinned. "I'm sure your ovaries are very peaceful. And pretty."

“That’s nice of you to say, but don’t expect me to call your ballsack pretty. Because I’ve seen it.”

“Ah, so you *were* looking.” Ice chuckled as Indy turned bright red and dug her fingernails into his arm.

“Shut up,” Indy purr-snickered into his thick arm. Then she looked up and sighed impatiently as Ice thumbed through the list of flights. “OK, so if we can’t get on a civilian flight, why bother scrolling through the schedules?”

“I said we can’t get on a civilian flight *manifest*.” Ice’s thumb stopped on an Air India flight listing. He glanced at his watch, then grunted and snapped the flip-phone closed. “But we’re still getting on a flight. We’ve got three hours to get to the airport. Plenty of time, even with Mumbai traffic.”

Ice paid the tea-man with a handful of colorful Rupee-notes. His squirming vision made it damn hard to tell the denominations, but from the tea-man’s toothy grin Ice figured he’d made the man’s month. He returned the grin, then snatched up his duffel, grabbed Indy by the wrist, led her down a side-street where they’d be slightly less conspicuous. He needed to make a call on that burner phone.

“I don’t get it,” Indy said breathlessly as they hurried down the side-street even though there was no external urgency—

just the frenzy of their drug-addled insides. “What are we going to do, sneak onto a passenger jet and hide in the galley?”

Ice shook his head as they stopped near a row of shuttered clothes-shops that hadn’t opened for the day yet. “Baggage hold. It’s pressurized and should be warm enough for us. They transport pet animals in the baggage hold. We should be fine.”

Indy shook her head like a pet animal in a rainstorm. “We’re going to be stowaways on a passenger flight to America? Are you crazy? We’ll be caught and arrested!”

Ice shrugged. “Possibly. But that’s only a problem if we get caught here in Mumbai. It’s a 15-hour direct flight from Mumbai to New York JFK—no layover in Europe, which makes it easier for us. So once we take off we’ll be fine. Jack and I worked a couple of summers as baggage handlers at JFK airport. I know how things work there. And I’ll give Jack a heads-up, see if he can make a couple of discreet calls to some of the union guys at JFK, maybe get them to drag their feet getting to Air India Flight 217, give us enough of a window to offload ourselves before the baggage handlers show up.”

Indy blinked twice, chewed on her bottom lip. “Well, there aren’t any U.S. military flights since we don’t have a base here. Embassy charter flights are off limits if we want to stay

under the radar. But cargo flights are a possibility, aren't they?"

Ice shook his head. "Way more scrutiny for cargo planes landing at JFK. Drug Enforcement Agency always gets their sniffer dogs on board those things before they allow offloading. And these days you've got Homeland Security looking for explosives or weapons being snuck into the country to arm potential terrorists. We'd get made for sure, and then we'll be in a holding cell waiting for Benson to bail our asses out. And we can't trust Benson right now."

"Can we trust *ourselves* right now?"

Ice chuckled grimly, glanced up and down the side-street. It was mostly shuttered clothes-shops on both sides. Like most of Mumbai, the buildings were residential with retail at street level. Also like most of Mumbai, every possible parking space was occupied.

He scanned the parked cars, looking for a vehicle with dusty windows to indicate it hadn't been moved in a while. His gaze rested on a blue Honda hatchback with tinted glass caked in more Mumbai-dust than its neighbors. "Wait here." Ice walked over to it, checked the tires to make sure they weren't flat, then peered in through the driver's side window.

No security system. He could hot-wire this model. He gestured with his head for Indy to come on over. “This should work.”

“We’re going to steal a car?” Indy frowned. “What about the owner?”

“We aren’t taking the car to America with us. They’ll get it back eventually. Besides, this car hasn’t been driven in weeks. They won’t miss it for a day.”

“Um, are you OK to drive? I can barely walk straight.”

Ice rubbed his stubbly chin. It still felt like straw. He glanced at his watch, then shrugged. “We have some time. We can wait a bit.”

Indy’s frown cut deeper. She chewed on her gummy-worm lips, scratched at her turkey-red neck. “Um, doesn’t this drug last 8 hours?”

“Closer to 10 hours. But the drug peaks quickly and then plateaus out. I’ll be all right to drive soon.” He grinned.

“Besides, most of Mumbai drives like they’re tripping on acid anyway.”

Indy forced a smile. Then she lowered her shades and narrowed her kaleidoscope eyes at him. “Wait, why do you know so much about LSD?”

Ice took a breath, his body stiffening as he held the air inside until it got stale and his lungs started to burn with the carbon dioxide building up in his cells. He turned away from Indy, still holding his breath as that LSD-peak seemed to get higher, taking him dangerously close to that edge beyond which lay a dark mass of unresolved emotion, dense like a black hole, its gravitational pull immense and unrelenting, dragging him closer to its poison core.

“They pardoned the turkey.” Ice blurted out the words along with a harsh exhale of used-up air that emptied his lungs like a pair of popped balloons.

“Sorry, what?” Indy took her shades off all the way. “What the hell does that mean? Who pardoned what turkey?”

Ice rubbed the back of his head, then snatched off his own sunglasses so he could rub his eyes. He took another heavy breath, then put the shades back on. “Thanksgiving. Eight years ago. Jack was on his first overseas deployment with the Army. I’d just come back from my first Delta mission.” His voice trembled as he spoke, but it was coming out now, all of it, fast and hard, like that dense dark coil of emotion was unspooling, unfurling, unwinding. He swallowed thickly, turned his thankfully shaded gaze towards Indy’s puzzled face.



“Got to my parents’ home just past sunset, let myself in the front door. Wandered into the kitchen, poured myself a tall glass of grape Kool-Aid from the pitcher on the counter, just like Mom always set out for me and Jack when we were kids.” He sighed. “Drank it down, poured another glassful, then strolled out the backdoor to where I could hear my folks in the yard. Which was strange, because it was Upstate New York in late November.” He paused a beat, chuckled darkly at the memory, which seemed more vivid now than the real thing all those years ago. “Found Mom and Dad sprawled outside on the frost-covered grass, eyes the size of dinnerplates, manic grins on their faces ... just like we have right now. They declared that they’d pardoned the turkey and buried it in the yard still whole and frozen. We were having soybean steaks for dinner.” He rubbed the back of his neck, flashed a grin that wasn’t far from a grimace. “Oh, and they warned me not to drink the Kool-Aid.”

Indy had drunk the Kool-Aid too, and now that she knew what it was, she was starting to relish the drug's feverish urgency, learning how to use the rabid revelations that emerged from within.

She watched the sunlight sparkle around Ice's drawn face as words tumbled out of his blur-moving lips. She thought she could actually *see* the sound. She understood that it was the drug producing a synesthetic effect in her brain—jumbling the neurological pathways so that sensory inputs got switched around, making vision appear as sound, making scent visible as light.

It was disorienting, but Indy somehow held on to that tiny speck of sanity which calmly whispered that she was on a drug, and she knew which drug, and it had been studied well enough that she was in no danger from anything but her own delusions, her own emotions, her own hallucinations.

Which, in a weird way, meant Indy was in control.

She rolled her tongue over her rubber-ducky lips, blinked eyelids that felt like alien wings. Ice was still talking, and Indy watched in slow-motion as his words formed puffy shapes in

the air, his emotions propelling those shapes towards her like little cartoon blimps.

For a moment Indy panicked that she'd missed everything Ice was saying, that the drug had opened up something in him and it was all coming out and she was missing it all, losing her chance to get to know this man whom she felt so deeply connected to now, like there was no way anyone else in the world could understand her after what they'd just been through together. She was forever changed, and he was the only witness to her transformation.

And Indy desperately wanted to do the same for him, to be the same for him, to seal that connection which felt cosmic but incomplete, like there was still something missing, something lacking, something still to come.

Unfinished business.

Now Indy gasped as her body reminded her of what still lay unfinished, like a story whose ending had been snatched away in that steam-filled shower. She gulped back a throatful of thick guilt, blinked away the wave of arousal that was the *last* thing she wanted to feel right now, the last thing she *should* feel right now, just when this man was opening up about pardoning turkeys but never forgiving his parents, how

that Thanksgiving trip had been a one-way ticket to his own version of hell, how he'd left home forever that night, turned his back on his parents in disgust, returning only when they were dying—dying from what a hidden part of Ice believed might be physical manifestations of psychic wounds, that his law-of-attraction-loving parents had never gotten over their son's back-turning, transforming their own guilt at hurting him into tumors that hurt themselves, ate them up inside like monstrous manifestations of a self-inflicted vengeance.

And sending Ice spiraling into a psychic hell where his rational mind promised that emotions didn't cause cancer but something in his heart whispered that maybe his parents were on to something, saw something he didn't see.

Saw something he couldn't allow himself to see.

And so all those years Ice had buried that dilemma, that crisis, that chasm between the man he wanted to be and the son he couldn't help being. It was a psychic wound, one Ice had never really acknowledged in his waking mind, a festering pit of dark emotion sealed in psychological scar-tissue and stored away someplace far and deep.

Wait, Indy thought suddenly as her head rushed and her heart thumped and her vision sparkled with vivid clarity:

Maybe she *had* been listening after all!

Not to his words but to something deeper, like this strange effect of interchangeable sights and sounds and scents was giving her access to *all* of him, a direct perception of multi-dimensional reality that simply wasn't possible in a normal state of consciousness where the physical senses were filters on the greater reality.

And suddenly Indy was burrowing into Ice's broad chest, wrapping her arms tight around his back, squeezing as hard as she could, trying to crawl inside his big warm body, get all the way to his thundering heart and tell him that she'd heard him, she'd felt him, she knew him, she ... she *loved* him!

Her heart filled and overflowed with warm liquidy love. Now she was certain that somehow those little word-clouds from Ice's blurry lips had penetrated her brain and body, had been heard through some other mechanism of the mind, the heart, the soul.

It reminded Indy of something she'd read about how the physical body stored not just the memories of physical trauma but the imprints of emotional violence too. Sort of like muscle memory—which meant not all psychological trauma was

stored in the brain. Some of it was stored in the body, in the muscles and tissues, the bones and sinews.

Maybe it was *all* stored in the body. All the earliest or darkest memories which couldn't be accessed by the brain because they weren't stored in the brain but the body.

Like maybe "science" had been looking in the wrong place.

Now Indy hugged him tighter, pressed her ear against his chest, feeling the vibrations come through as Ice kept talking about that Thanksgiving night. She could still feel that expansive wholeness enveloping his emotionally charged words, and the dominant emotion right now felt distinctly appropriate for a Thanksgiving memory:

Gratitude.

"I see it so clearly now," Ice muttered into her hair as he held her close against his body, like he knew the sound of his words were being picked up as vibrations by Indy's thumping heart, that they could only communicate this way now, with bodies pressed together, hearts beating together, cells pulsing with the same cosmic inner light that illuminates stars and galaxies. "Couldn't see it then, but maybe I wasn't prepared to see it then. At the time I thought my mind was breaking

because I hadn't come to terms with what I'd done on that first Delta mission, was losing my shit because I'd killed for the first time, taken a human life, done something that was universally acknowledged as unnatural and wrong." He exhaled heavily into her, then raised his head and took a sharp breath. "But now I think it wasn't so much that I couldn't face myself. It was that I couldn't face *them*. There's this unshakeable childish need to make your parents proud, you know? And shit, they *were* proud of what I'd accomplished through discipline and hard work." He shook his head. "But there was still something in me that whispered I wasn't the son they hoped for. I just couldn't square my parents' foolishly idealistic view of the world with what I'd learned about how things *really* worked—or at least how *I* really worked." He sighed out an exhale, his warm breath swirling the open strands of her hair, his heart beating in rhythm with hers like their interlocked bodies formed some strange musical instrument being played by the universe. "I realized I was a killer, Indy. That it was in me as sure as blood in my veins. The real trauma wasn't so much that I had taken another human life, but that I had done it with ... with a strange *satisfaction*. Like the pride a craftsman takes in his work. It wasn't *pleasure*—it didn't bring me *joy* to kill that sonofabitch

bombmaker in Somalia. It was more a feeling that shit, I can *do* this, I'm fucking *good* at this—and for the world to be peaceful and safe, *someone* needs to be good at this.”

“Yes, someone needs to be good at killing. But not just that.” Indy hugged him as tight as she could without breaking in two, then looked up into his handsome face, his shaded eyes masking nothing, letting everything through like there was no separation, no barrier, no obstacle, nothing but the two of them in all of space, through all of time. “Someone *good* needs to be good at it. And you *are* good, Ice. You're a good man.”

He smiled down at her as the morning sun smiled down on them both. She couldn't hug him hard enough without breaking them both, couldn't get closer to his body without crawling inside, couldn't get any more of this richly overwhelming warmth into her heart without exploding.

“You're a good man, Ice,” she mumbled again into his chest. “You'd have to be a good man to do what you've done and not lose your mind, not lose your balance, to not spin off into some permanent dark place. You're a good man. I mean it.”

Ice held her tight in that warm embrace of pure goodness. Then his left eyebrow perked up. “I seem to remember you



calling me a good man yesterday at that safe-house when I had you by the hair—and you sure as hell did *not* mean it then.”

Indy giggled as Ice’s fingers dug into her back, his palms sliding dangerously close to her ass. He raised his left palm and gave her a quick smack on her hip, making her gasp and glare at him.

She was about to object, but then Indy remembered their interchange when Ice was the big bad interrogator and she was trying to match his mind-games with her own powers of persuasion, doing her best to trigger something chivalrous and sentimental in that stoic soldier, that menacing monster.

“Well, I mean it this time.” She burrowed into him again, smiling when she felt his big palms resting comfortably on her lower back, just above her ass—which, she now recalled with a rush, Ice had labelled as *not-so-delicate*.

“Wait, so you admit that you didn’t mean it the last time?” Ice smacked the side of her hip again, then suddenly moved his palms down over her ass and squeezed hard before quickly drawing his hands back. “Oh, shit, I didn’t mean to do that.”

Indy almost blacked out from the rush of arousal manifesting as purple shockwaves rocking her body, roiling her soul, boiling her blood, blistering her brain. She swooned

against his body, her senses so heightened she could easily tell Ice was getting hard in his pants like she was getting wet in her panties, their bodies refusing to fall in line with what should have been a heavy conversation about childhood trauma, the prodigal son, sins of the father, mercies of the mother, something lost and something regained, something stuck and something released, darkness turning to light, drama turning to madness, blah-blah-blah turning to laa-dee-dah, something-something-something turning to nothing-nothing-nothing, get-your-hands-off-my-ass turning to shut-the-hell-up-and-kiss-me, kiss me now, please now, right fucking now.

Kiss me, Ice.

Damn it, just kiss me.

And as if those urgent words bypassed sound again and jumped from her mind to his, her heart to his, her soul to his, Ice smacked his hands back down on her not-so-delicate ass, leaned down towards her upturned face, and with their clumsy sunglasses clashing like cosmic gongs, kissed her full on the lips, hard and clean, firm and furious.

He kissed her.

By the Grape Gods of Cosmic Kool-Aid, he kissed her.

He kissed her grape-flavored gummy-worm lips as the world around them turned into sweltering swirls of laughing colors and giggling goo. Somewhere in the squirming coils of his mind Ice seemed to recall an extraordinary heaviness being lifted, like something had reached into him and yanked out a dark dense blob of sticky sickness, excised a tentacled tumor of thought-energy, tossed it aside like it was nothing, just an imagined heaviness, a bogeyman in the shadows that evaporated when someone turned on the lights.

Turned on *all* the fucking lights.

“I love you,” he mumbled through the floodlights of his release, not sure if the words came out as sound or scent, as light or laughter, as relief or revelation.

All he knew was that it was the truth, just like it was the truth that he was grateful for that terrible Thanksgiving, understood that it was the moment when he truly grew up, truly left home, really discovered who he was, broke free from the imagined expectations of his parents.

And in doing so, truly fulfilled their hippie-hearted dreams.

By choosing his own path.

Following his own star.

Accepting his own nature.

Loving his own darkness.

“I love you,” came Indy’s garbled response bubbling through the boiling lava-hot air surrounding their psychedelic cocoon. She was kissing him back with a hunger that only whetted Ice’s ravenous need for more.

More of her.

*All* of her.

“You love me? Where have I heard *that* before,” Ice growled into her mouth. “Oh, wait, I haven’t. Because you refused to say it earlier.” He kissed her again, then his big palms cupped her buttocks tight and raised her body off the ground, half-carrying half-dragging her towards the dust-tinted windows of their waiting chariot—which wasn’t ready to roll yet, but was sure as hell about to be hot-wired. “Get off me, Indy. I need to concentrate on getting this car-door open.”

“I’ll get off you when you get me off. I mean get me off you. I mean ... you know what I mean.” Indy convulsed into giggles, shaking her head in violent refusal, clenching her ass

in wiggly delight as Ice slammed her against the dusty car, kissed her like a rabid dog in season, mouth frothing and cock straining, the urge to attack merging with the soaring arousal, sex and violence combining into a playfully savage union, a dark desire glowing with a lighthearted edge, pulling them both down into it like giggling monkeys.

Indy wrapped her monkey-legs around Ice's waist and giggle-kissed him as he tried in vain to get her off him. Her grip was firm, and finally Ice just shrugged and began to waddle around the car with his woman attached to his midsection like they were a single beast of unknown origin. He tried each door handle with no luck, was about to smash in the rear window with his elbow when Indy shrieked triumphantly into his ear, almost splitting his tympanic membrane with her pitch.

“There's a moonroof!” she cried as Ice whirled her around, stumbling to find his balance with this strange new appendage wrapped around his torso and screaming into his acid-blasted eardrums. “It's popped up for ventilation. Here, I can get my fingers under the edge and flip the lever and maybe slide it open. Put me on the roof. Hurry. Up, up, away!”

Ice grabbed her ass and twirled her around and deposited her on the roof. He was grinning like a gargoyle, infected by her idiocy, aroused by her acrobatics.

He watched as she hung on to the sides of the roof with all fours, gritting her teeth and holding on for dear life as if the car was a surfboard hurtling through a blue-pink cosmic sea. Her face was peaked with wild delight, and Ice ogled shamelessly as she raised her ass towards him to get leverage on the cracked-open moonroof.

“I’d like to crack *that* open,” Ice mumbled from behind her, wondering why he was mumbling, then realizing his face was grinding into her butt as he held her in place while she broke into the blue Honda which was shaking like giggling jelly along with them.

Indy squealed in protest, wiggling her ass to get him off her. Somehow she got the moonroof to slide open all the way, and suddenly she was halfway down the hatch, her legs briefly sticking up in the air before she managed to wrangle her curves down into the tinted insides of their soon-to-be honeymoon suite.

Ice snapped his head left and right, scanning the street, then quickly glancing up to see if any early-rising residents

were capturing all this for the Internet's gawking pleasure. Thankfully the traffic noises from the main road seemed to have swallowed up Ice and Indy's orchestral maneuverings, and most of the apartment windows were still closed, air-conditioning units humming with pleasant reassurance.

Ice waited a three-count for Indy to get all the way inside, then tried the door handle again. It was still locked. He peered in through the tinted glass, wondering if Indy had broken her neck and it was all over, end of story, done and gone, nothing more to see. Just when he had moved on to deciding which coyote-snake-spook to murder first—Benson or Kaiser or Rhett—the door kicked open and hit Ice in the thigh.

“Took you long enough,” Ice grumbled as he tossed his bag in through the open back door, drawing a screeching protest from Indy, who appeared to have been in the flight-path of the flying duffel. “Sorry. Heads up. Another package coming in hot.”

Ice dove into the backseat head-first, landing squarely on Indy and flattening her into the seat with his weight. She gasped as her lungs emptied, groaned when his elbows dug into all sorts of unmentionable soft parts of her scrunched-up body, then giggled when Ice rolled onto his side and got them

both firmly stuck between the front seatbacks and the tiny rear bench.

Ice blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the car's dim interior. The tinted windows were further darkened by the layer of dust on the outside glass, casting everything in a strange greenish light that reminded Ice of a 1960s green-tinted movie reel.

“Watch your head.” Ice wriggled around to reach the front-seat adjustment-lever. He yanked it up and slammed the front passenger seat forward, pushing it down and opening up enough space that Indy wasn't in imminent danger of being crushed between a seatbench and a Delta killer. “Now watch your ass. No, wait, *I'm* watching your ass. Much better.”

They were somehow head-to-toe in that little backseat, and Indy was giggling hysterically as Ice viciously kissed her upside-down ass through her black stretchy pants. They were a seething mass of twitching body parts, and Ice could barely remind himself to keep his legs still so he wouldn't kick Indy unconscious.

A quick two-handed smack on her lovely butt and then Ice righted himself into a sitting position. Indy squirmed and



wiggled to right herself too, but was hampered by Ice's inability to take his paws off her ass.

The farthest she got was to manage a very ungraceful forward sprawl which landed her conveniently on Ice's lap like a schoolgirl ready to be spanked. Thankfully Ice had been trained by the U.S. Military to be decisive in tight situations, to take advantage of any opportunity, make hay when the sun was shining, slap ass when the butt was beckoning.

And slap ass he did, drawing squeals and shrieks as he brought his open palms down *smack-smack-smackety-smack* in a raucous rhythm on her rear globes, playing her buttocks like the bongos, bouncing her on his erection like a psychotic pervert as she squealed some more, shrieked some more, then finally relaxed and let out a shuddering sigh when Ice clapped down his open palms and kept them there on her ass, his big paws perfectly covering her ample cheeks.

Ice kneaded those beautiful buttocks until Indy was moaning and writhing on his lap. Then with one hand still rubbing her bottom, Ice ran the fingers of his other hand up along her spine, up along her bare neck to the back of her head.

Indy stiffened as Ice's fingers disappeared into her raven-dark hair. Her breath caught as he tightened his fingers, grabbing a fistful of her thick hair down by the roots. She moaned down into the seat, her ass moving under his massaging palm, her crotch grinding into his stiff erection, the two of them moving together in the cramped space like two drunk crabs locked in a topsy-turvy battle on the ocean's bed.

Ice's cock was rigid like a post, thick like a pillar, throbbing and pulsing as he pushed Indy's ass down and pulled her hair back. The position was surreally arousing, their surroundings completely alien, with the shuttered hoardings of an exotic city peering at them through dust-painted windows of an abandoned car.

Now he slid that massaging-pressing hand around her ass and got it beneath her, getting his fingers right up against the front of her tight pants, rubbing rough and deep, feeling the wetness come through two layers of cloth, making his fingertips sticky and sweet.

He drew his hand away from her crotch and brought those fingers to his face, inhaling her scent, then licking her sweetness.

The combination was intoxicating, a drug more powerful than the one they were already on. He grinned devilishly when he saw that Indy had turned her head and was staring at his filthy finger-licking, her eyes wide with aroused amusement, amused arousal, topsy-turvy, meat and scurvy, upside down and all around, left and right and out of sight.

“This is insane,” she groan-whispered as Ice gently pulled her hair to get her to turn onto her back. He released her hair as she managed the turn, his eyes glazing over when her ass ground into his cock, the front of her crotch now facing upwards on his lap. “Oh, Ice, touch me there. Please.”

Ice swallowed thickly, nodded dumbly, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. He was sitting behind the pushed-down front seat, which gave Indy enough space to spread her legs wide for him.

“Oh, fuck, you are so incredibly hot.” Ice’s entire body shuddered as he placed his hand between her legs and stroked her carefully, turning his hand around and pressing his knuckles lengthwise along her crotch as she shuddered in response. “I want you now, Indy. All of you. I feel so fucking close to you that I’m losing track of myself, losing track of who I am without you.”

Indy murmured something but Ice couldn't hear it through the urgency of his need, the hammering of his heart, the thundering in his temples. His own words echoed around his skull, driving home the desperate need to completely claim this creature, to perfectly possess her pussy, to absolutely own this woman.

Because she already owned him.

She mumbled something again, but the words made no sense because they were immediately turned into shapes and colors that zipped around his buzzing head like tiny alien battleships. He started to unzip her pants, then gulped back a sudden rush of wild energy that screamed a warning that the LSD was hitting its peak now, that they were heading to the pinnacle of crazy right now, that both of them were certifiably insane in this moment, completely out of their minds.

And maybe it wasn't such a great idea to get completely out of their clothes too.

They were in a stolen car in a soon-to-be-busy street in a foreign country a few blocks from a hotel room where they'd left a dead body and their own fingerprints.

Suddenly paranoia ripped through Ice's pulsing mind, and he almost shouted out loud when he realized he'd just pointed

this drug down a tunnel of thought that was far too realistic to pull himself back from. Which meant it would soon get far too difficult to divert his manic mind away from paranoia and back to pleasure.

Because the moment he opened the door to that panic-paved path he was tumbling down it head first and bottoms up, down and down into that pit of paranoia which screamed duty before dirty, protection before possession, that it was more important than ever to protect this woman now, that he fucking loved this woman and that changed everything.

Changed the mission.

Because now there *was* no mission other than this woman.

Ice knew it in his pulsing heart, in his fevered brain, in his screaming soul.

Nobody mattered more than Indy O'Donnell.

Nothing mattered more than keeping her safe.

Ice's head was splitting as he forced himself to stop his fingers from pulling Indy's zip all the way down. Her legs were still spread wide, her face contorted with unadulterated pleasure. A part of him whispered that she needed this, that he needed this, that they both needed this, that maybe the damn

*mission* needed this, needed them to cross this threshold, seal this commitment, finish what had stayed oddly unfinished, held back from the brink, like there was still a missing piece of the puzzle, some cosmic objection to this physical union, some other knot that needed to be tied before this deal could go through.

Now Ice felt a sharp pain behind his eye when he remembered the dangerously cruel idea that had popped into his mind earlier. He tried to blink away the idea, but it was hammering away inside his head, screaming that it would only work when this drug was hitting its peak, that the window was wide open right now but would close soon, that there was still something locked up in little Indy O'Donnell, one more piece of that inner darkness that needed to be dragged kicking and screaming into the light, that maybe this mission would fly off the rails and fail if that wasn't done, wasn't done *now*, that maybe Ice was at a crossroads again, that he needed to choose whether to use the powerfully pregnant energy of the moment for the pleasure of future sex ...

Or for the pain of past violence.

"What's wrong?" came her voice through the haze of indecision. "Why'd you stop? Don't stop, Ice."

Ice gulped back that sickening sensation of being trapped between heaven and hell, pleasure and protection. He tried to grin, but could feel the tension in his smile, saw how Indy noticed it too, her face scrunching up in momentary rage, giving Ice a glimpse of that angry little girl who'd been locked inside this woman for three decades.

For a long moment Ice wondered if he'd already made the wrong choice, killed the fucking mood yet again, sent this train hurtling down the wrong track. He could feel her attention on him, her glare making her eyes glow in the green-tinted mist of their little cave. Ice's hand was still on her crotch, his fingers teasing the cold metal of that half-undone zip. He was still erect beneath the firm cushion of her ass. He could just give in to what his body and heart both wanted, what her body and heart wanted too.

But his mind still said no.

It whispered that this drug had opened a door beyond which lay their forever. But they couldn't walk through that door all the way yet. There was something they needed to carry with them across that final threshold, take this strange mission to its endgame—an endgame where they came out ahead, came out alive, came out together.

And Ice knew damn well what lay unfinished.

The interrogation.

He wasn't done interrogating India.



Indy glared through red-tinted vision as Ice slowly zipped her half-undone pants back up. She was boiling with a deadly combination of arousal and anger, and if it wasn't so cramped in here and if her head wasn't close to exploding from the peaking drug Indy might have been able to right herself and cross her arms over her breasts and pout at this exasperatingly unreadable asshole who could heat up like fire and cool down like ice.

But it was all she could do to just hang on to a rapidly receding shred of reality. Her vision was a psychedelic frenzy, her body a buzzing beehive, her head a dizzying dance of drunk-as-hell dragons. Still, somewhere in her roiling brain simmered the vaguely reasonable thought that perhaps getting naked in a stolen parked car a few blocks from where she'd murdered her own mother wasn't the best move while peaking on LSD.

Like maybe Ice wasn't *totally* a teasing asshole for opening up that part of her again and then zipping her up like he'd changed his mind, pointed this drug in a different direction.

Except Ice's body didn't seem to agree, Indy realized when she tried to squirm off his lap and realized he was still stiff like a sea-monster poking its massive bulbous head above the waves to scan for a willing victim, a tempting target, a panting pussy.

Hungry hope rose in her, but then Ice twisted his body away to dig into his pocket for his phone and Indy decided that yes, he was a cold-hearted asshole who got a kick from pushing her buttons, pulling her levers, turning her dials—then pushing her away, pulling himself back, turning those dials down to zero again.

Absolute zero, where everything was frozen including air and light, emotions and energy.

“Speaking of dials, who the hell are you calling?” Indy watched with indignant disbelief when Ice opened that damn flip phone and started poking the buttons clumsily like he could barely see straight.

Ice frowned quizzically up at her, like maybe he was wondering when they'd been talking about dials. He shrugged, was about to say something to her, but then flicked his gaze away when the call connected and a man's voice came through the phone's surprisingly loud speaker.

“What the hell, Ice? I was about to get on a damn plane and come down there myself.” It took Indy a moment to recognize Jack Wagner’s voice.

Really? You zip me up to call your *brother*?

“You alone, Jack?” Ice’s voice was strained, his neck even more strained, like he was using every ounce of willpower and muscular strength to focus on speaking coherently instead of vomiting out the nonsense word-garbage that his peaking brain was undoubtedly suggesting. “Turn your Darkwater phone off. Benson might be listening in to see if I call you on another line.”

There was a pause on the other end, then Jack’s voice crackled through again. “Done. What the fuck is going on, Ice? Benson called me an hour ago asking if you were in contact using a burner phone. He sounded agitated, on edge, like shit was going bad. Then I tried calling your Darkwater phone and it’s dead. So I switched on my burner, figuring you’d call. If you were still fucking alive, that is. You all right, brother?”

Ice swallowed. “Listen, Benson is not to be trusted. I repeat, do *not* trust that snake. And most definitely do not tell him I called you.”

“All right, but why?” Jack was quiet for a long moment. “Ice, you sound strange. Your voice is all weird, like you’re being throttled or some shit. You sure you’re all right?”

“Shut up and listen. Someone sent an NOC asset after us. A woman. She’s dead, and hopefully won’t be found for a while. But we need to stay off the radar until we’re back Stateside. Off *everyone’s* radar.”

“Fuck. Benson didn’t tell me that.” He paused. “Only someone in the CIA can activate an NOC asset.” He took a sharp breath. “Wait, you think *Benson* sent someone to kill you? Hell, I will snap his neck, rip his fucking balls off. Give me the word, and—”

“No, wasn’t him, just chill,” Ice said in a strained, very not-chill voice. “Rhett Rodgers is the guy. Well, probably. Can’t be sure yet but my gut says yes. Benson slipped up and mentioned his name earlier.”

Jack let out a surprised scoff into the phone. “Rhett Rodgers? The CIA hotshot who’s been getting cozy with Senator Robinson?”

“Benson mentioned him to you?”

“Seen him visiting the Robinsons when I was doing guard-duty over the last couple of months.” Jack grunted. “And yeah, Benson did just mention his name. In fact I’m supposed to meet Rhett Rodgers in about twenty hours at Senator Robinson’s townhome. Darkwater got pulled from security duty at the Senator’s request, and I guess Rhett is going to station a couple of CIA guys in civvies to fill in the gaps until full-blown Secret Service protection gets approved. Benson, Kaiser, and Rhett are doing some kind of a security-assessment walk-through of the premises tomorrow while the Senator and his family are out of town. Benson wants me there since I’d been the lead Darkwater guy on the security team for the past couple of months.” He rumbled out a breath. “Does Benson know Rhett sent a damn assassin after a Darkwater man?”

“Yes.”

“Then what the fuck is Benson doing scheduling some bullshit meeting with the guy?” Jack’s voice was a low snarl. “And why is the damn CIA Director going to be at the meeting?”

“It’s got to be Benson trying to force this thing to a head.” Ice spoke clearly now, his eyes burning and intense as he

gazed directly at Indy while speaking to Jack. “Bring this mission to its endgame.”

Indy felt Ice’s intensity sink into her skin. She realized she was listening with rapt focus now, the drug drawing her attention to a sharp point. Silently she swung her legs off Ice’s lap, folded them under her until she was sitting cross-legged and gently rocking back-and-forth like an Indian yogi vibrating her way to enlightenment.

“Yeah, well, Benson’s endgame should be to make sure his Darkwater guys get home safe.” Jack’s anger was palpable to Indy, the brotherly bond making her smile even though she still wanted to sulk a little. “If he knew that you were in danger and didn’t do a damn thing about it ...”

“Nah, he warned me about a potential NOC hit, so he did right by me on that. But this mission is bigger than just me, which is why we can’t trust Benson completely. It’s bigger than any of the earlier Darkwater missions. There’s some sketchy CIA history tied up in this thing—with Benson at the center of it. And I suspect Kaiser’s future is somehow hanging in the balance too.” He took a breath, huffed it out. “It’s hard to explain, but I think this mission is going to decide who becomes the CIA Director when—and if—Robinson wins the

White House next year. So the stakes are high enough that Benson just might sacrifice everything—and everyone—for the bigger mission.” He shrugged. “And you know what? I get it. But it still means we can’t trust him. Not yet, at least.”

“Roger that,” Jack muttered. “Those are high stakes. No shit Benson sounds worried. But what the hell does he expect to happen at that meeting at the Senator’s home?” He paused, then exhaled sharply. “You think it’s a hit on Rhett Rodgers?”

“I wish.” Ice whooshed out a breath. “But they can’t just *murder* a high-ranking CIA man in the middle of DC.” He shook his head, took another heavy breath. “But Benson’s got something cooking, and I’m going to crash that dinner party.” Ice checked his watch, then glanced at Indy, his eyes gleaming with a strange knowingness that made her heart flutter. “Stay cool until I get there. We’ll sort this out together. Force our own fucking endgame. Get all those CIA snakes in the same room, so nobody can slither his way out with more lies.” He looked at his watch again, nodded with infectious excitement. “We’re getting on a direct flight to JFK in a couple of hours. Fifteen hours to New York, then a four-hour drive down to DC. Hell, if we pull it off, we’ll get there just in time for that meeting.”

Ice chuckled dryly, his eyes flashing with something that made Indy wonder if Ice had just thought of the very same thing that now occurred to her:

That Benson had scheduled this meeting with just enough lead-time for them to get there.

Coincidence or cunning?

Providence or planning?

Excitement hissed through Indy as she rocked back and forth like a cross-legged wind-up toy as the unanswerable questions buzzed around her like bees in a cosmic hive. Again she saw that flash of what felt like knowingness in Ice's burning green eyes, like maybe he was starting to believe in something he would never have before this day, before their minds had been ripped open by this potion administered by her murderous mother.

Oh, shit, don't think about her, Indy screamed inwardly as that hotel room suddenly flicked back into vivid focus.

Cursing herself Indy snapped her eyelids closed tight, biting her lip to hold her thoughts from going to that dangerously tender place again. The drug will take you where you point it, she reminded herself desperately, so point it somewhere else!



But she was already spinning down that tunnel, a dark space where the names *Scarlet* and *Rhett* were scrawled like glowing cosmic graffiti on the walls of her madness. She clawed at her hair, shook her head until her teeth rattled, dug her fingernails into her palms to make it stop, make it go away, make it ... make it come back?

Indy almost threw up as a ball of tight dark emotion tightened her throat with violent constriction. It felt like something was still packed away inside her, rolled up in the tiny angry fists of that damaged child Indy thought had been healed, pacified, laid to rest, saved. She kept her eyes closed, shook her head no-no-no, rocked side to side like a pendulum, then suddenly stopped when she felt Ice's arm slide around her shoulders and pull her close with his stabilizing power, hold her tight with his protective strength.

Her eyelids fluttered open to meet Ice's warmly reassuring gaze. He was still on the phone, but Indy could feel his attention on her, saw the understanding in his eyes, heard the soundless words mouthed by his silently moving lips.

I love you, he was saying without sound but louder than a scream, clearer than a crystal, truer than an arrow. I love you, Indy, so hold on to that, hold on to me, hold on to ... to *us*.

Because *that's* the endgame.

*We* are the endgame.

Indy heard all of this with soundless certainty, and she snuggled closer to his warm body and rested her head on his big shoulder and did what she could to keep it together, keep it in the here and now, keep her mind away from that dark tunnel where those names were spinning and swirling like dry leaves in a hurricane.

Names like Indy and Ice.

Rhett and Scarlet.

What had Ice said about how maybe the names *weren't* just a coincidence?

He'd said something about Benson having an "OCD thing" about names lining up.

Lining up like Ice and Indy lined up?

Like Rhett and Scarlet lined up?

Like Rhett, Scarlet, and *India* lined up, all from the same damn story?

Coincidence or cunning?

Providence or planning?

OCD or OMG?

Now again Indy's throat tightened like something dense and solid was trying to rise up and come out, come back, burst free into the light.

And again she pushed it back down, pulled herself closer to Ice, retreating from its darkness, reaching for his light.

It seemed to work, because Indy could hear Ice and Jack talking again.

“Roger that,” Jack was saying. Indy thought she could hear a grin come through in his voice. “I’m still buddies with the union guys at JFK. Should be no problem getting them to pop the hatch and then stay clear of Air India 217 for a few minutes after touchdown so you can offload your stowaway ass undetected. And I’ve got enough time to set you up with a vehicle in long-term parking.” He took a breath, his voice taking on a curiously excited tone. “Oh, hey, one last thing.”

“Shoot,” said Ice.

“The woman. Her name is Indy. You realize that Indy starts with—”

“I’m hanging up, Jack.”

“Holy shit.” Jack’s voice was bursting with that weird excitement again. “I knew it. Gale and Gavin. Hannah and Hogan. And now Ice and Indy? What are the chances?”

Indy stared at Ice, then closed her eyes and stared inside herself, into that dark space where names spun around like glowing neon signs which were alive and kicking, grinning and licking. The names were all connected with glowing threads of sparkling energy, puppet-strings being pulled by a coyote-headed wolf-eyed spirit-man in a tailored suit.

Indy forced her eyelids to open, somehow reminding herself she was on a drug which made everything seem meaningful and connected when really it wasn’t. It took some effort, but she kinda-sorta convinced herself.

“Are you convinced now?” Jack was saying. “Now do you believe what the other Darkwater guys were saying at Hogan’s bachelor party?”

“You mean that night in Atlantic City when you passed out naked in the Borgata’s fountain and we had to call in a favor with the Jersey cops to drop charges of indecent exposure?”

Ice snorted. “Grow up, Jack. And get your head out of the clouds and back in the game. This is serious. Now, I need you to do one more thing for me.”

Jack sighed heavily into the phone. “Yeah, all right, what is it?”

Ice cocked his head towards Indy now, his eyes hardening for a moment, then flashing with what felt suspiciously like an advance apology. “Pull the CIA personnel file for Rhett Rodgers. Send it to my burner phone.” He paused, swallowed, blinked, his voice dropping suspiciously low. “And make sure you include the guy’s photograph.”

Indy frowned when she saw that almost-anxious advance-apology in Ice’s gaze, heard the emphasis on the photograph in his voice, tasted vile sickness in the back of her throat where that dark mass of unnamable emotion had tried to choke her with its secret.

Though at some hideous level Indy knew the secret.

And she knew the emotion wasn’t so unnamable after all.

It had a name.

A name that was both coincidence *and* cunning, providence *and* planning, OCD *and* OMG.

“You don’t seriously think Rhett Rodgers is my ...” Indy stammered when Ice hung up the phone, then squinted at its tiny screen, watching for an incoming message. “I mean, it just

can't be. What ... what are you trying to do, Ice? What do you think is going to happen when I see Rhett's photograph?"

Ice shrugged noncommittally, rubbed the back of his head, kept staring at the phone like he couldn't look at her.

"Probably nothing. If there was something still buried in your subconscious, you'd know it by now—after all, if the drug unearthed that memory of your mother, surely if there was something that intense with your father, you'd ... you'd know it by now."

Indy felt that tightness constricting her throat again. "I thought you didn't believe Scarlet was my mother." She glared at the side of Ice's head as he stared at his phone, which had just beeped out an incoming message warning. "Also, what was Jack saying about the Darkwater names? Who are Gavin and Gale? Who are Hogan and Hannah? What the hell is going on, Ice? Talk to me, dammit. Fucking *talk* to me!"

"I don't know," Ice whispered, looking up from the phone and into her eyes, locking his gaze onto hers so deeply Indy saw right into him, saw that he was just as turned around as she, just as messed up, just as terrified.

Just as terrified of the truth.

“I don’t know,” Ice said again, his voice barely a whisper but so intense it felt louder than a scream. “All I know is that there’s something really damn strange about Benson and this Darkwater thing. Something that I’m ... I’m starting to understand but still can’t explain.” He blinked, took a deep breath, let it out slow. “Look, I’m barely hanging on to a thread of sanity here, Indy. But there is something eerie about the way the names have lined up in the previous Darkwater missions, before Jack and I came on board. Some of it is coincidence for sure. Some of it is Benson’s OCD thing for sure. But there’s also something more to it that Benson couldn’t possibly predict, sure as hell couldn’t control.”

“Like ... like what?” Indy stammered.

“Like this.” Ice leaned over and kissed her gently, softly, carefully, holding his lips against hers long enough to communicate what words couldn’t articulate, what images couldn’t capture, what the five senses couldn’t describe. “He couldn’t predict this, Indy. Couldn’t predict us. But at the same time he put us together like ... like he wanted to see what would happen, how it would play out. It sounds crazy—and hell, Benson *is* crazy in a way—but I think he’s setting up that final meeting to create what the other Darkwater guys

described as a vortex of energy, something that will draw in all the players and force the endgame. And you're at the center of it, Indy. You and I. We have to be there, but we have to cross some emotional frontier before we're *ready* to be there, *ready* to swing this game in our direction, *ready* to end this mission our way." He paused a beat, swallowed thickly, hesitating like he knew what he said next couldn't be taken back. "It sounds insane, something my woo-woo parents would come up with after eating magic mushrooms and washing it down with electric Kool-Aid. But it feels terrifyingly real right now."

Indy stared dumbly into Ice's eyes, the heat of his kiss still burning her lips. Her mind was moving at warp speed but somehow in slow motion at the same time, his words swirling around like three-dimensional puzzle pieces.

She watched in her mind's eye those pieces clicking into place to form a throbbing gasping pulsing psychedelic jigsaw of strange symbolism and mystical meaning, providential patterns and cunning coincidences. She stared in cosmic awe as the pieces snapped together in multi-dimensional ways that couldn't be comprehended by simple logic but made perfect sense when seen from the edge of insanity.



But there was one last piece that could only be understood from *beyond* the edge of insanity.

One jagged wretched stained stinking piece still spinning through the surreal space, searching for its potent place, a wicked grin upon its face.

“Show me his face,” Indy managed to mutter. “The photograph, Ice. Rhett Rodgers. Show me his damn face.”

But even before Ice pulled up the image Indy knew.

She knew it from the way that ball of filthy dark emotion rose up in her throat again.

Yes, she knew it.

And she also knew that slicing open that tightly wound ball of festered feelings, repressed rage, demonic despair would throw her headfirst past the edge of insanity, to a place she might never find her way back from.

Not without him.

And now as Indy glanced into Ice’s eyes one last time before crossing that frontier, she saw that he knew it too, knew the risk she was taking opening that door.

He knew it and he was ready for it.

Ready to bring her back from wherever she went.

Ready to bring her back to him.

“Indy, listen, you don’t have to do this if you’re afraid,” he said now, snapping the phone-screen closed and shaking his head. “Maybe we wait until this drug settles down a bit, gets past its peak. If this triggers something, there’s a chance ... there’s a chance you don’t come all the way back even when the drug wears off.”

Indy gulped back her fear, then shook her head. “You know we can’t wait. If you’re right about this whole vortex of emotional energy thing, then I need to open up that part of me, release all that densely packed dark energy that’s been bottled up for thirty years. It feels viscerally urgent, desperately important. I don’t know how to explain it, and you don’t either—hell, maybe even Benson can’t explain it. But I think we both understand it—temporarily, at least, while we’re still off our rockers.” She shrugged nervously, smiled weakly. “And we both understand that I may not have access to that deeply buried place without what this psychoactive drug is doing to my brain and nervous system right now. If I miss this window, we might not have what we need to end this mission our way.” She laughed hesitantly. “I don’t know why that crazy-talk

makes total sense right now, but it does.” She swiped at the air with feigned carelessness. “Of course, the fact that we are tripping our eyeballs out makes it pretty darn likely that this is all just muddled reasoning and overblown imagination. I mean, really, what are the chances that both my mother *and* my father tried to murder me in two separate incidents, independent of each other?” She chuckled darkly. “Besides, if Benson really did name Scarlet and Rhett all those years ago, wouldn’t he have named me Bonnie, the tragic baby from the original story? Instead I have a side-character’s name. See? Nothing to worry about. Show me the photograph. Let’s get it over with.”

Ice exhaled, then nodded, flipped the phone open again, punched a couple of buttons, and held the screen up for Indy.

She stared at the handsome older man looking directly at the camera, his eyes a mixture of cold confidence and hot determination, lips holding back something that could be a smile or a sneer.

Indy blinked, swallowed, kept her gaze on the photograph.

And felt nothing.

A glimmer of relief started to brighten her heart.

Then something almost stopped her heart.

She blinked in confusion, wondering if the drug was doing something weird to her gut, twisting her tummy, constricting her insides like there was something gaining mass and volume, power and steam, emotion turning to energy, energy coiling into a spring, all of it winding upwards in a dizzying spiral, spreading outwards in a sickening surge.

She stiffened against the seat, pushing Ice's steady arm away as her insides squirmed. There was still no visual memory, no images like she'd seen of her mother, no clear confirmation that Rhett Rodgers was anything more than a name attached to a photograph, a character attached to someone else's story.

But the sickening sensation kept rising, and now Indy recalled what she'd read about how memories weren't always stored as visual images, that trauma could live anywhere in the body, that energetic imprints could be branded in places so far from the brain that releasing them was a visceral physical experience, an unleashing of violent energy through the body not the mind, through the flesh not the psyche, through action not words.

And there were no words to describe what was happening to Indy now. She was vaguely aware of Ice's urgent calls, his arms trying to pull her into his body. And she was almost unaware of herself lashing out with her fists and kicking out with her legs until she felt her own knuckles connect with his nose, her heel smashing into his groin.

Ice shouted something, but Indy could barely hear him over her own screams. She was a flailing mass of legs and arms, her vision splintered, her mind shattered. She couldn't breathe, was choking on her tongue, the walls were closing in on her, squeezing the air from her lungs, she needed to get out, she needed to get away, run, just run, run fast enough and maybe you can outrun it, outrun yourself, outrun this thing inside you that feels alive and angry, wicked and vengeful.

Somehow her fingers found the doorlatch and Indy tumbled head-first out of the car, scraping her face on the concrete then slamming her palms on the rough pavement and crawling like some four-legged creature, sobbing and gasping, choking and crying, now hunching over and vomiting something vile and viscous, spitting and coughing and puking again, now sucking in lungfuls of air that seemed devoid of oxygen, was pure fire that burned her insides as she stumbled

to her feet, lashed out again at hands trying to grab her, tripped over the curb, slammed into the side of a car, bounced off like a pinball, and now she was finally thankfully gratefully running, running, running, couldn't run fast enough, couldn't run far enough, couldn't run hard enough.

Because there was nothing to do but run. Her mind had cracked wide open, unable to cope with memories that had bypassed the brain.

All she had left was her body now.

And all it could do was run.

Rhett ran the search again through the CIA personnel database. The results were the same.

*Paige Anderson—Voluntary Separation.*

There were no annotations, no exit interview notes, no names other than a generic CIA Human Resources date-and-time stamp.

“Damn it, they got to her,” Rhett growled, rapping his fingertips on the glass-topped worktable of his basement home-office. “Kaiser and Benson fucking got to her.”

He stared up at the ceiling, then glared at the walls. The basement room was windowless like a bunker, with thick fiberoptic cables disappearing into the blue-painted subterranean walls like black pythons. The cables passed through a CIA-issued encryption router before connecting to his Agency laptop. It was an official setup, mandated by the Agency a few years earlier to make sure top CIA officials could manage their operations if Langley was locked down for any reason. You couldn’t launch a drone attack with this setup, but Rhett had access to almost everything else from NSA satellite livestreams to NYPD traffic cameras.

Though of course none of it had helped him track down that treacherous bitch Paige Anderson. Her cell and home phones were disconnected. Her email addresses all bounced. Traffic cams and satellite images showed no sign that she'd returned to her Georgetown apartment building after presumably leaving CIA Headquarters at Langley following her "voluntary" termination from the Agency.

Rhett pushed his well-oiled swivel chair away from the horseshoe-shaped workspace, stood up and stretched his arms out wide to open up his cramping back. He'd been hunched over his laptop for hours trying to track Paige down. A part of him still believed she'd held up under Kaiser and Benson's questioning, had stayed loyal like the little lap-dog he'd thought she was.

But that part of him wasn't so sure anymore.

Not after getting the strangest meeting invitation from Kaiser.

"That's just insulting, Martin," he muttered, pulling up the message on his phone as he strode to the mini-fridge in the corner for a bottle of iced coffee. He cracked the seal and drank the cold-brewed espresso all the way to its dregs, then tossed the empty bottle in the trash, just barely controlling the



urge to hurl the glass at the fucking wall. He scanned the meeting invitation once more, noting that Kaiser had made it clear Benson would be in attendance since his off-the-books Darkwater guys had been watching the Senator's Georgetown home for the past couple of months and would have some insight that might help Rhett when he took charge until Secret Service protection came through. "I'm not a fucking amateur. No way am I walking into an empty townhome with you two sharks circling for blood. How dumb do you think I am?"

The strong coffee hit Rhett's system now, the adrenaline and cortisol surging in his blood, making his vision sharp, sparking his throbbing brain, giving him a second wind as nightfall settled outside his Maryland home. He paced to the sideboard beneath the wall-mounted flatpanel screen, snatched up the half-empty prescription bottle with his migraine medicine, popped two pills and crunched them between his molars.

He let the bitter powder linger on his tongue before swallowing. The migraines had been hitting harder over the past year or so. Rhett wondered if it was the increased doses of synthetic testosterone he'd been injecting. If so, it was worth it, he reminded himself as he flexed his pectorals, tightened his

triceps, stretched out his muscular back. Once you got past sixty you lost muscle mass alarmingly fast, no matter how hard you worked out. An occasional migraine was a small price to pay for being ripped like a superhero in your sixties.

Of course, tight muscles and a hard cock wasn't going to help him against Benson and Kaiser right now.

He needed information, intelligence, insight.

Inspiration.

“Think, damn it.” Rhett punched at the air as he paced his basement like a caged beast. “What are you missing? There’s always something you can use. Think harder. It’s in there somewhere.”

He slammed his open palms against the sides of his head, shaking himself like a fighter who’d just taken a hit but was still in the ring, preparing for his counterpunch.

Paige Anderson was a ghost now, he told himself angrily. He had to assume she’d flipped on him—even though there was a chance she’d simply quit her job and decided to lay low for a while. She’d been shellshocked when Benson called her at home pretending to be the CIA Director. And no doubt

Kaiser and Benson had rattled her cage pretty hard earlier that evening.

“All right,” Rhett said aloud, striding to the whiteboard on the south wall, picking up a red marker, writing down what he knew because visualizing it helped him see new connections, call on inspiration the way an artist might. “Assume Paige flipped on you, gave up everything. If so, why hasn’t Kaiser immediately suspended you from the CIA, ordered an investigation, already killed your reputation with Robinson and the Intelligence Committee?”

He wrote the question on the whiteboard, stepped back, then grinned when the answer popped into his head from that place in the subconscious where inspiration hid.

“Because Paige doesn’t have any hard electronic evidence that either she or you did anything,” he said, still grinning as he scribbled the answer in red ink. “So it would just be your word against hers, which would just create a scandalous mess—especially if the FBI got involved and leaked it to the press. Wouldn’t just fuck *my* reputation, but would also make Kaiser, Robinson, the Senate Intelligence Committee, and the current President all look incompetent. Nobody wants the FBI poking around the Agency—not Kaiser, not Robinson, not the damn

President. So that's off the table." He rubbed his chin with his fist, swallowed hard as his face tightened. "But still, if Paige talked, then she must have told them about activating that NOC asset ... Scarlet."

Now a tremor went through Rhett's body as the odd connection between the names hit him again. He'd chosen the codename Rhett himself all those years ago when Benson gave him the option. Then, when Bill Morris brought him into the Company two decades later as a legit CIA officer, he'd wanted to keep the name and so they'd sanitized and legitimized the Rhett Rodgers identity, backfilled the details, gotten it all cleared through CIA protocols as they existed at the time. Bill Morris had been instrumental in getting the cleaned-up Rhett Rodgers identity pushed through the vetting process, vouching for the veteran NOC asset. Now, of course, it would be almost impossible to bring a former NOC operator into the CIA as a formal employee. Too many complications with vetting all the previous identities and NOC missions—no way today's CIA would grant any kind of clearance to bring someone from the shadows back into the light.

Today's NOC program was a one-way ticket to the shadows, and Rhett had just about slipped back in the door

before it closed on that whole shadowy side of the Agency. Now *plausible deniability* was more important than ever—especially after that comedy-show of a Congressional Hearing where CIA Legal had worked it so that Kaiser could basically lie under oath about having no knowledge of any active NOC program. Today's NOC operators were truly nameless, faceless ghosts.

Like Scarlet.

That nagging anxiety clawed at his insides again. Rhett strode back to his laptop, clicked to the open tab where he'd been monitoring the NOC database, watching for any sign of Scarlet's name popping back onto the AVAILABLE list.

Because that meant Indy O'Donnell was dead.

Giving Rhett a sliver of an advantage.

Not as much now that Paige had turned on him, but still enough that perhaps Rhett could turn the game in his direction, maybe even close it out.

Once O'Donnell was dead, the plan had been to go straight to Senator Robinson, show him the planted evidence from O'Donnell's phone, then step back and let Kaiser and Benson take the fall once it came out that O'Donnell had been

murdered under mysterious circumstances overseas in the presence of a Darkwater man. Oh, and that she'd been recruited by Benson himself.

Darkwater would be done for, Benson would be cut off from any CIA privileges, and Kaiser would almost certainly be asked to resign.

But damn, it was not so clean for Rhett now that Paige might have betrayed him, he thought with rueful anger. But still workable. Kaiser could produce Paige as a witness, but that "trial" would most likely be private, for Senator Robinson's eyes only. Without any hard evidence proving that Rhett had activated Scarlet—or that Scarlet had even killed O'Donnell—it would still be Rhett's word against Paige's.

But Senator Robinson wasn't an idiot. And the Senator's wife Delilah had a soft spot for that coyote Benson—thanks to some connection with Gale Caldwell, who'd married Darkwater man Gavin McBane earlier that year. If this thing really got down to a he-said-she-said finger-pointing clusterfuck, Rhett wasn't so vain as to think that he'd win outright—especially not if Paige was even remotely believable. Yeah, sure, without hard evidence Robinson might not force Rhett to resign, but after hearing Paige out, there was

a solid chance the Senator might strike Rhett's name off the short-list of Director candidates along with Kaiser's, playing it safe by giving someone like the aging Bill Morris the job.

Still, there was a small chance Paige had not in fact betrayed him, Rhett told himself as he drew out a probability-matrix on the whiteboard to work out his options. The probability of that was admittedly low, but it wasn't zero. That geeky little blonde had definitely been in swoony puppy love with him until yesterday, and surely Benson and Kaiser couldn't have turned her heart around *that* fast.

Unless Benson had showed her the video.

A sharp splinter of pain shot through Rhett's right temple, making him wince and reach for his prescription bottle. He crunched down two more bitter white pills, then calmed down enough to push the past back where it belonged.

Yes, that video was a smoking gun that Benson had held at Rhett's head for three decades. But it was mostly irrelevant here. Even if Benson had used it to turn Paige against him, that video was never making it to Senator Robinson. The good Senator would be morally—and legally—obligated to report it to the FBI, and it would create a scandal that would raise so many questions that Robinson, as head of the Senate

Intelligence Committee, might find his own reputation tainted by association with Benson and Kaiser and Rhett.

No way would Kaiser and Benson allow that.

Those two old-school patriots were determined to get Senator Robinson to the White House.

Rhett himself couldn't care less. Robinson was a means to an end, a cog in the wheel of Rhett's own ambition. The Senator was powerful, popular, and held serious sway over the CIA—enough reason to curry the man's favor using every trick in the book.

And Rhett had written the damn book on cozying up to powerful men and women. He'd been working the Senator and his wife carefully and methodically over the past year, and both Marcus Robinson and Princess Delilah were very much under the spell of his charm.

Enough of a spell that if Scarlet did check back in after killing O'Donnell, Rhett was still tempted to roll the dice by going directly to the Senator. Rhett might get burned himself, but that was not a certainty—unlike Kaiser's destruction, which would be assured.



Hell, even if Robinson nixed Rhett's chance to be the next CIA Director, Rhett might salvage enough reputation and position that he'd live to fight another day, take another shot, spin up another game.

And shit, if Rhett *did* fall out of the Senator's favor, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if that guy Diego Vargas showed up and took the Senator off the board, opened up a path for Rhett to take another shot at the brass ring with some other Senator, some other Presidential candidate.

Yes, Diego Vargas was a wildcard that nobody could play yet, a joker still hidden in the deck.

Diego Vargas ...

Wait a fucking minute.

Now suddenly something clicked inside Rhett's brain. He blinked rapidly, almost dropping the dry-erase marker. Feverishly he paced the basement, rubbing the back of his head as the image formed in his mind's eye, a mental photograph he'd snapped from early in that very long day, from when he'd walked from Dupont Circle to Paige's apartment building in Georgetown.

An apartment building not so far from Senator Robinson's townhome.

In fact you might just be able to see the Senator's home from the top floor of Paige's building—certainly from the roof.

Excitement surged as Rhett finally saw what he'd sensed was there all along. Some hidden piece of information that his spy-trained mind had captured and stored away in the subconscious.

Like any spy worth his salt, Rhett had developed the habit of being hyper-aware of his surroundings at all times. You trained yourself to notice everything about the people around you, always watching for stalkers or assassins, tails or tags.

You also noticed the vehicles around you.

Especially van-sized vehicles.

Like the battered white maintenance van that had been pulling out of Paige's building parking lot just as Rhett strolled in.

A maintenance van driven by a maintenance man.

A forty-something Hispanic male with longish hair and a thickish beard.

And eyes that Rhett remembered clearly for two reasons:

One, those eyes had been scanning the surroundings like the guy had been trained to be hyper-aware—unusual for a maintenance guy going about his dreary daily routine.

Two, those eyes matched eyes from a photograph that had been circulated amongst a select few CIA men after that most recent Darkwater cover-up with the *Rivington* and Northrup Capital.

A photograph of Diego Vargas.

Sure, the file-photo showed Diego clean-shaved with a military-style buzzcut. And according to Benson's report to Kaiser, his Darkwater guy Hogan had caught a glimpse of a Zeta on board the *Rivington* matching that look. But that was months ago—enough time to change almost anything about your appearance.

Except your eyes.

It was damn hard to change the eyes.

There was always something about the eyes, Rhett thought with feverish excitement. Hell, hadn't he read somewhere that the eyes are the only part of a newborn baby to come out

almost full-sized, virtually fully-developed, all-seeing, all-knowing?

The thought seemed to hit upon something else hidden in Rhett's subconscious, but he was too excited about this Diego Vargas thing to worry about mining any more nuggets from his unconscious right now.

He hurried back to his desk, logged back into his laptop, got into the local traffic-cams feed he'd been looking at earlier. He'd already located the traffic-cams around Paige's building, and now he pulled up the footage from earlier that day, around when he'd been walking into the building and seen the maintenance van driving out.

It took several excruciatingly long minutes to find the right time and the correct camera angle, but when the images finally filled the screen Rhett raised his arms in triumph, punched the air in victory, almost whooped in frenzied delight.

It was Diego Vargas, no doubt about it.

"Come on, come on, come on," Rhett whispered urgently, his trembling fingers barely able to pinch the touchpad to zoom in on the van's license plate. It took a couple of tries, but finally he got a clear-enough image to read the plate.

It was a Maryland registration. Within moments Rhett was in the Maryland Department of Motor Vehicles database. He typed in the license plate number, punched the ENTER key, then curled his fingers into claws poised above his keyboard like an anxious panther waiting to pounce.

The search came back with a generic-sounding name of some maintenance company in Baltimore. Rhett took a screenshot of the address, printed out a copy, then sat back and tapped his chin.

Vargas wasn't going to be anywhere near that address, of course. The guy had been Mexican Special Forces in his younger days, before moving to the infamous Zetas. The Maryland maintenance business was probably legitimate—hell, maybe even the job was legitimate through some of Vargas's connections in the States.

It wouldn't be a straight line from the van registration to the elusive Vargas. But the guy was on the map now. Rhett had turned up a solid lead and a recent photograph. Even the bumbling FBI would be able to track him down in days with this kind of information. Maybe faster, now that the NSA had those supercomputers that combined all traffic-cam footage from around the country, used automated image-recognition to

read the license-plate numbers from the footage, then ran highly sophisticated Artificial Intelligence programs to give almost real-time locations for any vehicle's last-known position.

Hell, with that new tech the FBI could track down Vargas in *hours*, not days.

And shit, Rhett had access to NSA search from his basement setup, didn't he?

He could find Diego Vargas right now if he wanted!

Rhett exhaled hard, trying to catch his breath after the rush of almost euphoric excitement. His mind spun into high gear, calculating if this sudden breakthrough changed things with the O'Donnell thing.

At first Rhett was tempted to immediately put out an alert, get the FBI on it, then make sure Senator Robinson knew it was Rhett's work that got the bust. That would certainly buy Rhett some serious brownie-points with the Senator and his wife—after all, he'd just gotten their entire family out of mortal danger!

But Rhett held off on the alert.

Some instinct told him to keep this to himself right now.

Vargas didn't know he'd been made. And the Senator and his family were out of town campaigning for the primaries, so there was no immediate danger. Rhett could sit on it for now, see how this O'Donnell thing played out.

Because maybe Vargas would come in handy if Robinson did need to be taken off the board, assassinated just like Diego wanted.

Rhett now had the wildcard in his pocket, the joker up his sleeve.

"It's all coming together," Rhett muttered, rubbing his temples, his eyes wide with adrenalized excitement. He'd experienced this strange confluence of breakthroughs before on missions—not often, but enough to recognize the shiver of serendipity, the chill of coincidence. It usually meant things were turning in his direction—but at the same time Rhett couldn't rush it, needed to wait and see if any other pieces of this puzzle clicked into place.

Other pieces like ... Scarlet, perhaps?

Oh, hell, wouldn't *that* be a gift from the gods if Scarlet's name popped back into the NOC database now, signaling that O'Donnell was dead and done. It would still be a roll of the dice going to Robinson, but this time the dice would be loaded

in Rhett's favor. Diego Vargas would be a trump card that Rhett could play if things weren't going his way in the he-said-she-said with Robinson. He could hold on to it until the very end, use it to either make himself look good and swing Robinson's opinion, or else keep it a secret to be used later in case Robinson needed to be eliminated.

The pieces were lined up now, Rhett thought with almost frenzied anticipation as he checked into the NOC database once more, scanned the list with burning eyes for Scarlet's name, that oddly coincidental name that still tickled something in Rhett's brain.

No Scarlet.

"Fuck!" Rhett shouted, refreshing the screen twice more and then pushing the laptop away. He took a harsh breath, rubbed his face, exhaled hard. His heart hammered in his chest as that name spun through his mind again, triggering that same nagging sense like there was something he might be missing here too. Too many coincidences, all of them popping up together.

Just around the time Benson had popped up again.

He pushed his chair away from the desk, stood and stretched again, then strode back to his whiteboard diagram.



He wrote the names BENSON and SCARLET in red ink, then stepped back and zoomed out.

But although his eyes zoomed out, his mind kept zooming in closer.

Closer on those names.

Rhett recalled that he'd immediately been suspicious of the name Scarlet when Paige mentioned it out loud. It had sounded like something Benson would plant in the NOC database just to make a point, flip his middle finger at Rhett, maybe even throw down the gauntlet with an audacious dare, a cheeky challenge.

That suspicion had faded when Paige had gone behind the scenes on her computer, worked her hacker-magic, verified that Scarlet had been in the NOC system for years, was most certainly not a recent recruit, couldn't possibly be a last-minute trap set up by Benson—even if Benson did have access to the NOC system, which was unlikely.

But now Rhett remembered Paige saying Scarlet had been in the NOC system for decades, almost thirty years.

Just like Rhett himself.

A chill passed through him as he let his mind drift back to that time when he'd been put into the NOC database as a new agent codenamed Rhett. Benson had been tickled by the name. And wasn't it possible Benson had recruited more than one NOC operator back then?

Hell, not just possible but probable.

Rhett gulped back a sudden sickness. He lurched away from the whiteboard, staggered across the room, stumbled to his chair. He sat down hard, rubbing his throbbing temples as he recalled some of what he'd been hearing about Benson's Darkwater outfit.

Something about how the Darkwater names were all lined up.

Something about how Benson had some OCD thing about that.

About the names.

Did Rhett and Scarlet fit that pattern?

Wait, no, not just that: Rhett, Scarlet, and *India*.

All from the same damn story.

Coincidence or cunning?

Providence or planning?

Benson or bullshit?

Again that sharp pain stabbed behind his eye like something was trying to poke into his consciousness. Another of those connections he could feel somewhere in that free-associating creative part of his brain, the same hidden part of his subconscious which had given him Diego Vargas's eyes.

"Eyes," Rhett muttered, rubbing his own burning eyes as his caffeine-fueled testosterone-jacked pill-pulsing mind whirred like some cosmic washing machine combining images and mixing memories, dredging up the past, offering up the future. "I've seen those eyes before."

Rhett shook his head almost convulsively fast, pulling up that photograph with the eyes that had popped into his mixed-up mind's-eye just now.

Not the photograph of Diego Vargas's eyes.

A different photograph.

Another snapshot of another's eyes.

India O'Donnell's eyes.

"You can't change your eyes," Rhett muttered. "They're the same eyes you're born with ..." His voice trailed off as

O'Donnell's photograph filled the laptop screen, filled Rhett's mind, almost his entire world as he stared into that woman's eyes, that girl's eyes, that ... that child's eyes?

He stared frozen into those eyes for a long terrifying moment, then clapped his hands together hard as if to break a spell, to pull himself back from where his frazzled mind was dragging him.

You're exhausted and wired and it's been a hell of a day and you're starting to see things that aren't there, he told himself with trembling urgency. Benson popped back into your life and you thought of that video and all those memories are bubbling up again.

But hell, you know memories can't be trusted when they're thirty years old, he warned himself. And the name Scarlet is making you believe one coincidence too many. Get your head straight and focus on the here and now. The past is dead.

And so is that child.

The moment of madness thankfully passed. Rhett closed O'Donnell's picture, clicked out of the NOC database, rubbed his eyes again, then stared across the room to his whiteboard squiggles and scribbles. It brought his mind back into cold

focus, and he moved on to the next decision that needed to be made:

The meeting with Kaiser and Benson.

After dark at an empty house.

Unusual to the point of absurdity.

Could they be so audacious and obvious as to attempt an old-school hit on Rhett?

Had Kaiser and Benson decided that Paige's verbal evidence was enough to justify them taking Rhett out the CIA way?

No trial, no jury, no funeral, no fuss.

Just plausible deniability.

No, Rhett decided as a calmer sense prevailed. Kaiser and Benson could be cold-hearted snakes, but they weren't idiots. No way they could just murder a high-ranking CIA man on U.S. soil—and surely they weren't reckless enough to do it at Senator Robinson's home. That was dragging *plausible deniability* well into the realm of fantasy.

So why the invitation to a completely preposterous meeting with the CIA Director and his off-the-books ex-CIA

buddy in an empty house with bulletproof windows and reinforced steel doors?

They couldn't possibly expect Rhett to take it at face value and believe this was really about a fucking security detail—which was going to be moot in a couple of weeks anyway when the Secret Service approved the pending request under the “Protection of a Major Presidential Candidate” clause.

Which meant it was bait.

They weren't inviting him to a damn meeting.

They were inviting him to the endgame.

Into the arena.

“You two washed-up cowboys have been out of the field too fucking long.” Rhett chuckled darkly, rubbing his lips, then shaking his head. “Do you seriously expect me to stroll in there with two six-guns and a ten-gallon hat for a shootout at sundown?”

He chuckled again, but this time the laughter caught in his throat. Fuck, he would *love* to eliminate Benson, get even with that sonofabitch who'd outsmarted Rhett all those years ago, back when Rhett was only starting to understand what kind of a man he was inside, what was lurking in his shadow. But now

Rhett was *all* shadow, and damn, wouldn't it be sweet as sin to wipe that coyote grin off Benson's face, see real fear in that snake's eyes.

And if Kaiser got taken off the board alongside, that actually might be an endgame Rhett could win!

“Don't be an idiot,” Rhett snarled when he realized this was *exactly* what Benson was hoping for—to toss down the gauntlet, trigger Rhett's shadow to snatch it up, go all-in, end this game in the shadows where it had begun, in the darkness where it belonged. “Don't lose your frame. You know it's not going to be a straight-up hit on you. It's a provocation. They're just baiting you, seeing if you crack under the uncertainty of not knowing what Paige told them, not knowing what they know, what they can prove. So just go to the meeting as if it's another day on the job. Stick to your cover story that yes, you were fucking Paige Anderson and so what? You already know she hasn't got any hard evidence, that she covered her own tracks so well even *she* can't un-hack the destroyed electronic trail. All Benson and Kaiser have is her word against yours, and that's why they've set up this ridiculous meeting. Maybe they're going to offer you some backdoor deal in exchange for resigning or taking yourself out of the running for the

Directorship. Maybe they're going to pull out that old video and try to blackmail you—again. Maybe they'll be wearing wires, even get the whole place wired. But most likely it's bait. They want to provoke you into doing something stupid and giving them an excuse to put you down." He laughed again, this time with a hint of relief that he wasn't going to take the bait, would be in supreme control of himself at the meeting, wasn't going to allow himself to be provoked or blackmailed, coerced or compromised. "It's a last-ditch attempt to draw you in. A desperate move by two aging idiots who've ridden their last rodeo. They're going to try every psychological trick in the book to break your frame, wreck your confidence, get you to either retreat in defeat or react in rage. But you won't lose your frame. You've played this shadow-game almost as long as these two old dogs. They're good, but you're better. Maybe even the best."

The self-talk did the trick, and with surging confidence Rhett pulled up the meeting invitation on his laptop calendar, accepted it with a quick click, then sat back and exhaled.

Then suddenly Rhett inhaled sharply.

Something had flickered onto the laptop screen.



An internal alert issued by the State Department, urgent and classified, for top CIA eyes only.

Rhett sat up, frowning as he clicked on the flashing alert, dread slithering up his throat even though such alerts were not uncommon, popped up a few times a week. They were mostly courtesy alerts informing the CIA when some U.S. national was arrested in a foreign country. Usually it was some drunk tourist doing something stupid. Occasionally it was something more sensitive—like when U.S. military personnel stationed abroad did something dumb or illegal off the U.S. base.

But this alert came from a place with no U.S. military bases.

Mumbai, India.

Rhett's face drained to a ghostly white as he read the alert, which was hastily written, indicating that the State Department wanted to get it to the CIA immediately:

To All Level-5-Cleared CIA Officers:

American Embassy in Mumbai has been alerted by Indian Police that a dead woman has been found at the Raj Palace Hotel. Police have identified the woman as an Indian national

with no prior record. She was dressed in a hotel staff uniform but hotel has confirmed she is not an employee. Single gunshot wound through the left breast. No shell casing found. Bullet was 9mm hollow-point that was destroyed on impact so little chance of conclusive ballistics match.

Embassy was contacted because hotel room is registered to an American citizen, male, entered on tourist visa one day prior, no criminal record. After running his prints through NSA, FBI, and U.S. Military records, we have privately identified him as Michael “Ice” Wagner, former U.S. Army Delta Force, current employer unknown. This information has not and will not be divulged to Indian authorities.

Room appears to have been vacated in a hurry, without checking out. A second set of fingerprints lifted from room. Another U.S. citizen—India O’Donnell, female, 29, presently in the country under Diplomatic Authority, attached to the U.S. Embassy in Mumbai. O’Donnell is not reachable by phone, nor locatable at her quarters in the Embassy.

Given that O’Donnell has Diplomatic Immunity, State Department has intervened and demanded a gag-order be issued so that no details are leaked to the Indian or International press—certainly none that will be confirmed by

any official Indian or U.S. authority. Of course, our friends in the Indian Government are suspicious that CIA is conducting illegal operations within their borders. We have strongly denied it and will continue to do so. Will play hardball with the Indians if they threaten to go public—we have enough leverage to keep it quiet. Situation is sensitive but stable.

State Department recognizes that CIA covert operations are classified. This is an urgent informational message, restricted to CIA Level-5+ personnel only.

End of Message.

Rhett slowed his breathing just enough to process the alert without blowing a gasket in his head or busting a valve in his heart. He rubbed his lips until they were raw enough to bleed, then snatched a tissue and dabbed his nose which had in fact started to bleed again. He tossed the bloody tissue, then inhaled sharply, swallowing a warm mix of blood and snot, his fingers rapping on the glass desk as he read the alert once more.

The second read-through calmed his nerves. State Department was good at handling foreign governments, and

the United States always had enough leverage to twist the screws anytime they wanted.

And the last line was a classic: *State Department recognizes that CIA covert operations are classified.*

Loosely translated as:

“Look, if you spooks are running O’Donnell and the Delta guy, do not make a fucking mess by allowing them to get picked up by the Mumbai Police. Get them out of the country or kill them yourselves, we don’t give a fuck so long as State doesn’t have to grin for the cameras and do the old *plausible deniability* dance for you CIA cowboys who don’t follow rules, ethics, morals, or fucking common sense. Over and out, bitches. USA forever.”

Rhett forced a dry chuckle, then pushed his chair back from the desk and groaned. Kaiser had obviously seen this, which meant Benson would know in a few minutes.

Know that the dead woman was Scarlet.

That O’Donnell and Wagner were alive.

That maybe the game had swung back in their direction again.

“Shit. Shit. *Shit.*” Rhett slammed his palms down on the desk, then balled his fingers into fists. It’s all right, he told himself. Yeah, it would have been nice if Scarlet had finished the damn job. But this wasn’t a disaster. Benson and Kaiser couldn’t prove that Scarlet had been an NOC asset—hell, that was the whole point of the NOC program. Which meant they certainly couldn’t prove that Rhett had activated Scarlet. It would still be Rhett’s word against Paige’s if Senator Robinson got involved.

Though of course a dead woman in Wagner’s hotel room would make Paige’s story a hell of a lot more believable, Rhett worried. Enough that even right now Kaiser and Benson might decide to change tactics, go to Robinson anyway, roll the dice that the Senator would believe Paige and not Rhett.

Would they cancel the meeting, Rhett thought as he rubbed his mouth, then plucked feverishly at his lower lip. And if they didn’t, should Rhett even show up there?

Hell, maybe it was time to admit defeat, he wondered with a sinking heart and rising venom at the thought of losing. Cut a deal with Kaiser and Benson, agree to resign, bow out of the game, submit to blackmail yet again, bend the knee to those

two crafty old coots, acknowledge that they're the alphas and you're just a whimpering beta-dog.

No fucking way, snarled his shadowy alpha-dog ego.

Take them both out, came the darkly exciting whisper from his venomous heart. So what if you go down with them. Do you really want to live out your days in the shadow of defeat—especially to *Benson*?

Red rage burned in his heart, but Rhett swallowed the anger, reminded himself that Benson was counting on Rhett not being able to stomach defeat, not being able to cut his losses and bend the knee, slink off into the shadows to lick his wounds.

It took several agonizing minutes, but Rhett finally talked himself down, returned to a modicum of rationality, told himself that the plan hadn't changed, that he would still go to the meeting calm and composed, pretend like he knew nothing about O'Donnell, swear with practiced serenity that he'd ended it with Paige after Benson's phone call, that Paige was a woman scorned and hell, they all knew what a bitch who'd been dumped was capable of saying to get back at the man, right?

“Right.” He exhaled the stale air from his lungs, blinked the burn from his eyes, reached for his laptop to shut it down.

And noticed that the State Department Alert contained three attachments.

Three images.

He clicked the first.

A file photograph of Ice Wagner. No surprise there.

He clicked the second.

A passport photograph of India O’Donnell. No surprise there either—though her eyes still unsettled him.

Then Rhett clicked the third photograph.

Police photo of the dead woman from the hotel room, sprawled on the carpet, blood-soaked uniform, eyes half-open in death, a strange calmness on her beautifully tragic face.

A face that drained all the blood from Rhett’s own face, maybe from his entire body, like his heart had stopped and somehow reversed its beat, sucking the life-force out of him, leaving just an empty gasping gagging gaping shell of a man who’d seen a ghost from the past, a past that was bubbling up like poison from the swamps of his dark soul.

Scarlet?

No.

*No!*

Rhett turned his face and vomited.

His body heaved as he retched again and again like demons were screaming their way out of his racked body, tearing at his insides, ripping his soul to shreds. His vision was splintered blackness, his body seizing up like he was being electrocuted.

“No!” he rasped, falling to his hands and knees on the floorboards, hunching over and dry-heaving until nothing came out but saliva streaked with blood. “It can’t be. It ... it *can’t!*”

But it was, and as Rhett’s vision flickered back just enough to assure him he wasn’t dead from a heart-attack or a brain-aneurysm, that his life-force hadn’t been ejected by the shock of seeing Scarlet’s face, he collapsed on the floorboards and rolled onto his back and stared up at the blurry ceiling.

“Benson,” came the growl from somewhere in his throat. He didn’t know exactly how or exactly what or even exactly why.



But he knew exactly who.

“Benson,” he snarled again, turning over onto his side, ramming his fist into the wood and forcing himself up.

Rhett staggered to his feet, stared at the photograph again to make sure, then dropped heavily into his chair. It rocked on its springs, making little noises that sounded like distant shrieks.

He rocked gently and trancelike in the chair, his eyes wide and unblinking, fixed on that photograph of the Scarlet he'd once known, the Scarlet he'd once owned, the Scarlet he'd once ... loved?

The thought brought a surprised smile to his strained mouth, bursting open the skin where he'd been plucking his lower lip. He licked the fresh blood, swallowed it down, then shook away the strange thought.

But the strange thoughts kept coming, like something strained inside him had ripped open, just like that broken lip. He rubbed the back of his head, then reached for his laptop and clicked open the second image, India O'Donnell, pulling it up and aligning it with a close-up of Scarlet's face.

The similarity was eerie.

The connection was unreal.

The eyes were the same.

The eyes couldn't lie.

“You lying sonofabitch.” Rhett’s voice was a choking gasp, the rage rising so fast he would have thrown up again if there was anything left in his hollowed-out body. “You lying scheming piece-of-shit dark-hearted snake-tongued motherfucking *bastard!*”

And now something snapped inside Rhett’s mind, perhaps his body too. He wasn’t certain if it was something breaking or something coming together. All he knew was that suddenly his mind was clear like a bell, his thoughts sharp like arrows, focused like lasers, muscles tight and tense, ready for action, ready for revenge.

It all came together now—not just what Benson had done, but what Rhett was doing to do.

A wild grin broke on his blood-snot-saliva-puke-streaked face. Everything fit together in that exhilarating way which happened only once in a while, when coincidences weren’t just chance, when fate wasn’t just fiction, destiny not just a dream.

Because fate had reached out a helping hand to Rhett today.

By giving him an instrument of destiny in the form of Diego Vargas.

Fever burned through Rhett now as he dragged his laptop closer and furiously clicked and scrolled until he was in the NSA supercomputer application, running an AI-assisted search on that Maryland license plate.

The little wheel started spinning as the search began to generate results, listing traffic-cam snapshots of the van at various times and locations throughout the day. Rhett drummed his fingertips on the tabletop, then glanced down at the row of drawers beneath his workstation.

He pulled open the third drawer. It contained two Glock 17 handguns. Both were untraceable, with serial numbers filed off, loaded with 9mm hollow-points that would cave in upon impact, making ballistics almost impossible to match to a specific weapon.

He retrieved one of the weapons, checked the magazine and chamber, then placed the gun carefully on the desk, pointing it away from him with cautious habit that was built into his muscle-memory.

But the other memories that seared his throbbing brain were pushing him dangerously past the borders of caution. The thought that the woman and child had been alive all these years, all these decades, all this time . . . hell, it was doing something to him, ripping him up inside like psychic razorblades cutting through some cold dark part of him that Rhett had always assumed *was* him, the slashing realization exposing something raw and vulnerable, a wistfulness that worried him, a tenderness that terrified him.

You took them from me, he thought with a viciousness sharpened by what bubbled up from this secret psychic space revealed by what Benson had hidden from him all these years. Rhett wasn't sure if it was real or imagined, if it was something he'd felt back then or was only feeling now, after thirty years of darkness and death, thirty years of solitude and shadows, thirty years of being angry and alone, thirty years of violence without compassion, sex without love—like perhaps there was some eternal fundamental part of him that the shadow could not completely own, could not completely drown, could not completely destroy.

Love.

Was that the weird wistfulness that racked him?

Was that the terrifying tenderness that tore at him?

Was that the searing sadness that overwhelmed him?

Rhett didn't know, and hell, he didn't fucking *want* to know. He'd been this man for thirty years, perhaps forever. There was nothing new he was suddenly going to discover about himself. Nothing new he *wanted* to know about himself.

Grow the fuck up, Rhett, he screamed inwardly. You didn't love the woman and the child back then, so there's no way you can love them now. This isn't love, it's weakness. You've gotten soft sitting behind a desk in Langley. See it for what it is, and use it for what needs to be done.

Slowly the familiar sneering smile which had been a comfortable mask for thirty years found its way back to his face, bringing with it the cold control that was his armor, his superpower, his shield against the weakness of human vulnerability. Rhett exhaled in relief, blinked away some wetness from his eyes, focused his mind back on Benson, back on vengeance, back on the game that he sensed was within his grasp now, within his reach, like this serendipitous revelation had taken away Benson's advantage, given Rhett the chance to go all-in and play his wild-card, his joker.

He glanced at his laptop screen.

The search for Diego's van was complete.

He scrolled down the list to the last known location, glancing at his watch, then back at the screen. Last traffic-cam capture was thirty minutes ago. Junction of Case Avenue and 86th Street in Southeast Baltimore.

Rhett zoomed in on the snapshot, then clicked over to the Maryland traffic-cam live-streams to scan the area in more detail, see if the van was parked somewhere close to its last-known spot.

He knew that particular Southeast Baltimore neighborhood—not well, but enough to know it was an up-and-coming area of town, lower rents and some boarded-up buildings but relatively safe compared to some other parts of Southeast Baltimore. No drug-slingers on the corners or drive-by shootings at noon. Bustling retail doing brisk business during the day. Quiet at night, with just a couple of small bars and restaurants, maybe a grocer or drugstore staying open late.

Rhett switched between the live cameras, zooming in on an apartment building down the block, hoping he'd see the van parked outside the front door.

No luck.

He flipped to another intersection, a couple of blocks away, in the direction the van had been pointed thirty minutes ago.

Jackpot.

The van was parked in an almost-empty lot attached to a little strip-mall. It was too far away to read the plates, which was why the NSA search hadn't hit. But it was definitely the van.

The strip-mall looked deserted, with a nail-salon and a wash-n-fold laundry both shuttered for the night. But there was one shop window with a neon OPEN light still blazing beneath the painted store-sign.

A little Mexican bodega.

The sign said *Mercy's*.

“Lord have mercy. I cannot eat another bite.” Diego Vargas spread his palms wide over his empty plate, shaking his head vigorously as Mercy tried to serve him another steamy-hot tamale wrapped in corn-husk, dripping with delicious goodness that reminded Diego of times long past, days long gone, memories long dead.

And that wasn't the only memory Mercy's unexpected invitation had triggered in Diego's calloused heart—a heart which had long since gone cold, died that sunny afternoon decades ago when his entire world turned dark, when his two pretty, smiling, dancing, loving reasons for living had been taken away, torn away, raped and murdered away while Diego was held down and forced to watch, forced to witness, forced to understand that Mexico was run by the Cartels, that being a proud honorable Mexican Special Forces hero did not exempt you from the law of the land, the rules of the game, the consequences of breaking those rules.

And the warm homely scent of fresh tamales wasn't the only thing that triggered desperately yearning memories that



afternoon when Mercy had invited Diego into the back room to fix a leaky faucet.

At first Diego had stared hungrily at the pleasing way Mercy's bottom moved as he followed her into the back room. If this had not been the United States—which at least had *some* semblance of the rule of law—Diego might have taken what he wanted right then and there, behind the counter with Mercy bent forward, head pushed down on the greasy glass, her screams filling the air as he rammed into her deep and hard from behind, the only way he ever did it these days, the only way he liked it now, with violence and anger, a mad desire to drag everyone into the darkness where he'd been dragged that ugly afternoon, into that cave of deranged horror where he permanently lived now, eternally drowning in a psychic cesspool of blood and vengeance that had once been a good man's soul.

A good husband's soul.

A good father's soul.

“Are you my father?”

The question had cut through Diego's heart that afternoon when he followed Mercy into the back room of her little bodega. He'd been startled not just by the child but by the

matter-of-fact innocence with which the little black-haired girl had looked up doe-eyed from where she sat cross-legged on the floor, a coloring-book open to the image of a prancing unicorn, bright crayons scattered all around her like glowing pixie-sticks in a magical garden.

Diego had lost his voice in that moment, his breath taken from him, his entire body wrenched down by the way his gut seized. Thankfully Mercy stepped in, her cheeks bright with blush as she hurriedly answered her daughter's question which had been asked with the unfiltered innocence of a child yet untainted by the ugliness of reality.

"No, Cari," Mercy had said, glancing apologetically at Diego, then squatting down to her daughter's level and sweeping the mess of crayons into a neat line. "You know your Papa is in heaven."

Cari frowned at her mother, then peered past Mercy's shoulder towards Diego. Her gaze made Diego's gut wrench again, like something solid was in there trying to get out, a ball of memory so dark his brain refused to store it as visual images, instead shoving it down into some blind space in his body where it festered like a pustule, ticked like a time-bomb.

For a startling moment Diego thought he saw his own lost little girl in Cari's doe-eyed gaze. Then he blinked and it was gone, leaving him soaked in sweat, like a fever had risen and broken. His legs felt like jelly, and it took considerable focus just to stay upright and force a stiff smile at the little girl looking up at him, looking *into* him.

Cari's little face scrunched up into a pout, like perhaps she was disappointed that Diego wasn't her Papa. Diego shrugged with playful apology, then flashed an involuntarily warm wink that made the child giggle.

Cari gave him a little wave, still holding a stubby blue crayon. Then Cari glanced back at Mercy, and in a whisper that easily carried to Diego's ears, said, "Is Papa in heaven now? Because sometimes you say he is in hell where he belongs. I hear you say it sometimes."

Mercy stiffened. She sighed, then gently took the crayon from Cari's fingers, closed the coloring book, leaned close to her daughter, whispered something softly in her ear.

Diego couldn't pick out the words. He watched in silence as Cari clambered to her feet, then padded in her rubber-gripped socks to a small green sofa at the far end of the back room. A boxy little TV faced the sofa. Cari turned it on.

Cartoons. More unicorns. She scampered back to the sofa, pulled her little legs into her body, snuggled into herself, was immediately lost in the rainbow-colored world of prancing magical creatures.

Mercy was still squatting down, taking her time gathering up the crayons and putting them back into their cardboard sleeve. Diego ran his fingers through his unruly hair, pulled at his beard to straighten it best he could. He was tempted to sniff his underarms, but there was no need. He'd been in these maintenance-man overalls for three days, and although he showered twice a day, he still smelled a bit ripe.

“Sorry for that.” Mercy stood and turned to him, her cheeks still burning with embarrassment and perhaps something else. “Cari just started kindergarten. There was something in class yesterday about *what do your parents do*, that kind of thing. She heard the other kids talk about fathers.” She placed the coloring book and crayon box on a neat shelf against the wall, then curled a strand of hair around her left ear, glanced shyly at Diego, and shrugged. “It must be from the kindergarten thing. Because she has never asked a man that question before.” Her eyes widened for a flash, blood rushing to her cheeks again. “Not that there has been any man. Any

man here in the back room, I mean.” She closed her eyes and quickly turned away, but not fast enough for Diego to miss the silent inward curse that slipped past her lovely red lips.

Diego had felt his cock move at her disarmingly clumsy self-consciousness. But along with the thickness in his trousers came a warmth in his heart, a buzzing in his head, a smile on his lips that felt different from his usual sneer.

“The faucet,” he’d managed to say, trying to break the awkwardness but instead feeling the tension rise up his throat, making it hard to speak clearly. “You said there is a leak.”

“Oh, yes.” Mercy hurried past him, gesturing towards an adjoining room which was a combination pantry and kitchen, with a stainless-steel counter-and-sink combination along one wall, shelves of neatly stacked foodstuffs in cans and bottles and jars and boxes along the opposite wall. A large industrial fridge stood at the far end, a flat standalone freezer tucked into an alcove beside it. Everything was neatly arranged and spotlessly clean. “Here, it starts leaking when you run the tap.”

Diego nodded, walking to the sink and turning on the water. The leak was beneath the metal sink. It wasn’t too bad, but it wasn’t just a matter of tightening a joint. “That section of pipe needs to be replaced. I can stop by a hardware store

after work today, bring the new fitting over this evening. Or tomorrow, if you close early.”

“I stay open till midnight.” Mercy swallowed, a flash of worry in her eyes. “How much will the new pipe cost?”

Diego swiped away her question. “You can pay me in tamales. It’s no problem.”

Mercy had blinked and looked away, trying to hide her relief. She touched her hair, then glanced back at him and smiled. “That will be a lot of tamales. I had better start paying you back soon. Will you ... will you eat dinner with us tonight, perhaps?”

With *us*?

Diego had gulped back a rush of some unnamable emotion, his gaze darting to where Cari was giggling and clapping along with the unicorns. Something inside him whispered a warning, that he needed to walk away from this right fucking now, before he got involved in something that couldn’t possibly end well.

Especially not for Mercy and Cari.

After all, Diego was a hunted man, on the run and on a mission. He’d been very careful to stay in the shadows these

past few months. Only a select few trusted *hermanos* knew he was in the United States—and of those none knew where he was at any given time. Diego had a clean alias, enough to get past a traffic stop so long as they didn't run his prints. Diego couldn't be sure what the CIA had in his file, but he distinctly remembered being fingerprinted all those years ago when the Zetas and CIA were on the same side.

Back when the CIA had *created* the Zetas.

A paramilitary organization trained by CIA-sponsored American ex-Special Forces killers. The plan had been to use the Zetas as a proxy for American behind-the-scenes intervention in the Cartels' narco-empires that stretched from Guatemala to Colombia, moving Mexican-grown heroin and marijuana at first, then progressing to Colombian-grown cocaine, now evolving to what was by far the most profitable drug ever transported across the vast USA-Mexico border:

Synthetic Fentanyl.

Cheap as dirt, thanks to Chinese bulk chemicals shipped directly from Beijing and Guangdong to secret ports on South America's eastern coast, then smuggled into Mexico, processed and packaged into pills and powders, shipped across the border at crossings controlled by the various Cartels.

The Zetas no longer controlled any major border-crossings, but the new Zeta-Nation owned one of those lucrative ports on South America's eastern seaboard where Chinese ships docked under cover of darkness, unloaded their poison cargo of fentanyl precursor chemicals. It was good money and would get better, but the Zeta-Nation port was still tiny compared to what the Colombian Cartels owned, which was why Diego still desperately needed the U.S. "aid" money that Northrup Capital—and now IMC Corp—was diverting to groups like the Zetas and Urzis and Kendos.

"No," Diego had said that afternoon, shaking his head perhaps more vigorously than necessary, like he was trying to get that buzzing out of his brain, stop that humming in his heart. He was finally building something big back home, laying down roots in the blood-soaked land of his ancestors.

Of course, some of that blood had been spilled by Diego himself as leader of that CIA-created Zeta-monster that had long since been cut loose and disavowed, all connections severed.

Plausible deniability.

The CIA's only inviolable rule.



So long as they could deny it straight-faced to the American people, everything was fair game to those forked-tongued snakes.

Snakes like John Benson, whom Diego had briefly met decades ago, then seen on the *Rivington* a few months ago, and now outside Senator Robinson's townhome that very morning.

"No," Diego had said again, backing away from the faucet, retreating from the hurt in Mercy's eyes at his almost violent rejection of her invitation. "I cannot come tonight. I will bring the pipe tomorrow during the day."

He'd turned and walked out of that back room, stormed through the store, hurried to his van so he could get the hell away from what that woman and her child had opened up in him.

But once opened that old wound did not close. Diego had spent the rest of the afternoon staring at the walls of his tiny apartment just a few blocks from that warm bodega with doe-eyed unicorns and hot tamales that smelled like family, smelled like freedom, smelled like home.

And before he knew it the sun had set and he'd gone to the hardware store and now he was back here, at *Mercy's* bodega, in that warm cozy back room.

He'd come like he couldn't stop himself, like he was being drawn to that sickeningly warm sensation that poured from that open wound in his heart, that festering fissure in his soul. The horror of those memories still burned like fire in those wounds, but what Diego had felt in the presence of Mercy and Cari that afternoon was like healing waters over those flames.

And Diego couldn't stay away.

"Get your hands away so I can put another tamale in your plate." Mercy's pretty brown eyes danced as she approached him with a fresh batch. "Come on. Do not insult my cooking."

Diego relented with a sigh, a broad smile washing over his face as he watched Mercy serve them each one more tamale. They were sitting in the back room at a square metal folding table placed where Mercy could keep watch on the store. A few customers had strolled in as the three of them—man, woman, and child—ate together like a fairy-tale family.

Mercy had gotten up to serve the first few customers, ringing them up at the register, bagging their stuff, making change, and wishing them well. But then she'd taken Cari to the bathroom, getting her five-year-old ready for bed. A woman had come in to buy a quart of milk and several Three Musketeers candy bars. Diego had almost panicked when she

came to the counter and glanced at him expectantly. He'd conducted daring night-raids on Cartel compounds. He'd planted explosives powerful enough to blow him to bits if he crossed the wrong wire. He'd tortured men just to show young Zeta recruits how it was done, his heartrate barely rising as men screamed for death just to make it stop.

But somehow the prospect of ringing up a quart of milk and making change for a couple of candy bars scared the shit out him.

Because of what it meant.

Because of how it felt.

Because of that sudden desperate yearning for a simple life, running an honest business, loving a brown-eyed wife, raising a doe-eyed daughter.

A life of unicorns and rainbows, magic and music, dancing and dreaming.

Dreaming the American dream.

With trembling fingers Diego rang the register and made change and bagged that creamy white milk and smooth dark chocolate. With quivering lips he'd thanked his customer and wished her good night.

And with a lump in his throat he'd turned back to that metal dinner table that was built of cold steel but glowed with a warmth that Diego felt in his heart, the kind of fire that didn't burn, just lit him up from inside, casting light upon what had only been shadow, illuminating some part of Diego that the shadow had not darkened all the way, something eternal and unchanging, a shining silver thread hanging down from heaven, just within Diego's reach, all he had to do was grasp it and it would pull him up from the hell he'd committed himself to, a hell that he'd embraced like it was all he wanted, all he needed, all he deserved.

"Dessert?" Mercy's voice cut through what felt like a cloud around Diego's consciousness. "Just ice-cream sandwiches, nothing fancy."

"I want an ice-cream sandwich too!" Cari's voice came calling from that sofa near the now-silent TV.

"You had *two* before dinner!" Mercy rolled her eyes and sighed as Cari came bouncing over in a blue-and-yellow unicorn-themed pajama suit. "All right, you can have a bite from mine."

Cari shook her head firmly, then looked at Diego, who'd just unwrapped his ice-cream sandwich. "I want a bite from

*his.”*

Mercy was about to protest, but Diego nodded and offered her his untouched ice-cream bar. His heart thrummed with that unnervingly overwhelming warmth as the little girl came around to his side of the table, placed her hand on his arm to steady herself, took a big bite from his ice-cream sandwich.

Then, her mouth still sticky with sweetness, Cari planted a big slobbery kiss on Diego’s cheek.

Diego was shellshocked, startled like he’d been ambushed by guerillas, bushwhacked by banditos. He watched with a stunned smile as Cari ran over and kissed her Mama goodnight, stole a bite of her ice-cream too, then scampered back to the sofa-bed and was out of sight before Diego could recover from the shock of memories that he’d buried so deep he thought they were lost, that perhaps they’d happened to someone else, to a different man.

“Well, I think she likes you.” Mercy looked at him with a curious hopefulness in her eyes, It lasted only a flash before she hurriedly blinked it away. “Your ice-cream is melting.”

Diego blinked himself back to this strange new reality where he’d just been kissed goodnight by a unicorn-princess and was eating an ice-cream sandwich with a woman who was

looking at him like he wasn't a murdering thieving torturing twisted deranged psycho killer who'd done things that would make Satan himself lock the gates of hell so Diego couldn't get in.

“Why is her father in hell?” he asked without thinking—even though he'd been thinking about it all afternoon. Diego had walked the dark path long enough that he could see the shadow in another, read it clear as a billboard. It was there behind Mercy's eyes, shifty and secret, but not buried so deep that she was unaware of its existence. “I mean heaven, of course,” he added hurriedly, just in case Cari's little ears were pricked up behind that sofa.

Mercy shot a glance towards the sofa, cocked her head like she could tell whether Cari was awake or dreaming. She stayed silent for a long moment, then popped the last bit of her ice-cream sandwich past her lips, pushed her chair back from the table, began clearing the plates and ice-cream wrappers and crumpled napkins.

Diego reached out and placed his rough palm over her hand, gently tightened his grip until she stopped clearing the table. The sensation of that simple touch felt like a hundred explosions inside Diego, and his heart raced like he was

running for his life when Mercy turned those big brown eyes in his direction, blinked those long lashes, then silently sat back down, keeping her hand in his.

“He died in prison, just a few months after Cari was born.” Mercy slowly drew her hand back, crossed her arms over her chest, her shoulders hunching involuntarily, like she wanted to retreat into herself, was accustomed to doing just that.

Diego studied her for a long moment. “*Died* in prison or was *killed* in prison?”

Dark panic streaked across Mercy’s face. She blinked rapidly, frowning just long enough that Diego saw the wheels turning behind those brown eyes, like she sensed something in Diego, heard something in his question, understood that perhaps this man knew a thing or two about death.

And about killing.

Diego waited for a response which did not come. He watched Mercy fidget with her fingers, bite her lower lip, mutter something under her breath like she was used to talking to herself, scolding herself.

Hating herself.

“What was your husband in for?” Diego didn’t let up. He could sense she was close to opening up. There was something here, he thought. Something in her that wasn’t all rainbows and unicorns. Something angry but alluring, tragic but tempting, dark but delicate. “Tell me, Mercy. I am in no position to judge another. Not every man in prison is evil. Surely there was something good about him if you married him.”

“He was *not* my husband!” A vicious frown cut a V down the pleasant contours of her face. She blinked several times, then swallowed hard. “I did not even know him.” Mercy shot a quick glance towards where Cari was curled up on the sofa. She cursed under her breath, closed her eyes tight, kept them closed for a long moment, then flicked those delicate eyelids open and stared dead ahead, focused on some distant spot past Diego. “He was in prison for rape.”

Diego stared at her blank expression, her dead eyes, thought of that quick glance towards her daughter.

And suddenly he understood.

His entire body seized as the realization tore through him like a thousand splinters.



Mercy saw the realization in his eyes, shrugged, then took a resigned breath and stared past him again into nothing. “I wanted to kill the child before it came out of me. It was tainted, evil, born out of violence and darkness, sin and sickness.” Mercy’s voice was barely a whisper, her eyes dark pits focused on some far-off spot beyond Diego. Then she blinked, snapped back into focus, flicked her gaze towards him. “But one day it occurred to me that how can the child be all those things before it is even born? A newborn child is the purest form of innocence, arrives untainted into the world. Therefore any labels of evil and sin come from my own dark heart, not the innocent soul of the unborn child.” She sighed, a trembling smile showing on her lips, glassy wetness glimmering in her eyes. “Still, every day was a struggle to not end the pregnancy, to not remove that child of rape from my swollen belly. Finally one day I came to understand that it is all a choice—*my* choice, that I had the power to either claim that child as mine or reject it as his. And I decided the child is *mine* not his. Cari is *mine*, not his, was *never* his, will *never* be his.” She blinked twice, her eyes widening with a flash of panic, like she’d only just remembered that Diego was basically a stranger to whom she was confessing her sins like he was her *padre*.

It took a moment for the red-hot rage to settle enough for Diego to speak. “I swear by *Santa Muerte*, he is lucky to already be dead,” he managed to growl, the words coming from deep in his throat, his eyes narrowing to slits. “How did it happen? How did he die?”

Mercy hesitated, studying his face like she was desperately trying to decide whether to go forth or step back, trust this man or turn him away. Diego waited silently, unable to speak because of the suffocatingly heavy sense of being drawn to this place, to this woman, to this broken little half-family that had been created in darkness and was desperately clinging to some dream of light.

Mercy stayed silent for a long time as well. Then, like she’d suddenly made her choice, she started speaking, the words coming fast, tumbling out of her just like Diego felt them both tumbling down some hole that had already been dug for them by fate, designed for them by destiny. “After my testimony, a woman approached me outside the courthouse. White woman. She was in a black skirt-suit, very elegant and well-spoken.”

Diego grunted. “Lawyer?”

Mercy nodded. “From some Philadelphia law firm. She invited me to lunch. I thought she was going to offer some kind of pro-bono representation to sue the man in civil court after his criminal conviction.” Mercy looked away for a flash, hugging herself again, but this time without fidgeting with her fingers. “But instead she offered me justice. More justice than the criminal conviction. A different kind of justice, she said. Old-world justice.”

Diego’s eyebrows moved up and stayed up. “She arranged a hit inside prison? Who was she? What did she ask for in return?”

Mercy shook her head. “Didn’t give me her name or the name of her firm. And she asked for nothing. She said she had many powerful clients, some with connections to prison gangs, that they owed her more favors than she could possibly call in, that this was her way of dispensing a little bit of *real* justice.” Mercy frowned briefly, touching her hair and shifting in her chair. “There was something strange about her. It scared me, to be honest. Like perhaps there was a part of her that ... that *enjoyed* having that kind of power.” She shrugged, glancing down at her lap, then up into Diego’s eyes. “Or maybe what

scared me was how this woman made *me* feel about having that kind of power ... power over life and death.”

“Tell me how it felt to you.” Diego squeezed her hand, then sat back and ran his palms over his hair, which he’d carefully pulled back into a tight pony-tail before this dinner-date. He’d considered trimming his beard, but it had taken months to grow and did a good job of obscuring his features. Facial hair was a key part of changing your appearance—especially because you couldn’t change your eyes. The eyes always gave you away. “Having that sort of power can be addictive, you know.”

Mercy’s gaze narrowed. Diego could see the wheels turning back there once again, like she could see there was more to this maintenance-man than a knack for fixing faucets, like she could sense Diego himself had wielded that dark power over life and death, was addicted to it like that anonymous lawyer had been, hungered for that power which Mercy herself had tasted, maybe even enjoyed.

“Who are you?” she whispered now, tilting her head slightly to the left, her gaze penetrating him like she could see the shadow hidden behind his eyes, was reaching for that shadow, drawing it out in a way that could be dangerous, could

drag her into the darkness before she ever got a chance of pulling Diego into the light. “Who are you, really?”

“Diego Vargas,” came the answer.

But it didn't come from Diego.

Diego froze where he sat.

Someone had crept up behind him.

“Move and you die,” came the man's bloodcurdlingly smooth Southern drawl from above Diego's head, stopping his heart for a moment, chilling his blood for a flash. “Good. Now relax, Diego. If I wanted you dead this would already be over. We're just going to have a little chat.”

Diego felt the cold barrel of a handgun press against the back of his head, and now his heart raced with rage, his blood boiled with anger, his eyes closed as he cursed himself for not paying attention to the front door gently opening then silently being locked, the OPEN sign going dead because someone had flipped the switch off before creeping quietly across the empty store, sneaking up undetected on the admittedly distracted Diego but still with stealth that revealed decades of practice.

The guy was a ghost.

Diego knew it in his bones.

A damn spook.

How did they find him?

Then Diego realized there was no *they*.

The guy was alone, which meant maybe he *did* want to talk, cut some kind of deal.

Either way, Diego had no choice but to listen. The spook had a locked and loaded gun against Diego's skull, gloved finger on the trigger, his coldly sneering voice oozing with the telltale sign that this man knew the taste of that darkly addictive power over life and death, was very much exercising that power over Diego's life and death right now.

And over theirs too, Diego thought as the darkest panic roared through his heart when he saw the terror in Mercy's eyes, could imagine the terror in little Cari's eyes when she awoke to the grimness of a world where unicorns did not exist, magic did not work, a smile could not save you.

Rhett smiled under the black silk mask, his mind spinning through the new possibilities opened up by this romantic little dinner-date he'd stumbled upon. The woman looked scared out of her mind, her panicked eyes darting towards the sofa across the neat little back room. Was there someone else here?

A quick survey of the items in the room told Rhett that this woman had a child. Crayons and coloring books on the shelf—unicorns, from what Rhett could make out. A girl. She had a daughter. This got better and better. Things really were turning in Rhett's direction.

He turned his gaze towards the woman. "Empty your pockets. Phone, keys, money, tampons, whatever. On the table where I can see everything." Rhett pushed the gun barrel down hard onto Diego's skull, just above his ponytail. "You too, Diego. Extra-slow for you, buddy. I've read your file. I know what you can do."

"I am not this man Diego. You are making a mistake, Senor. Please, we are just—"

"Oh, come on, don't waste your breath, and don't waste my time," Rhett said sharply. "Do what I say and everything is

going to be just fine. Like I said, Diego, if I wanted you dead, you'd already be dead. If I wanted to bring you in, there'd be FBI and DHS and SWAT crawling all over this place already. You know that."

Diego's body stiffened, then relaxed almost imperceptibly. The woman shot a curious glance at Diego, then slowly pushed her chair back from the table and emptied her pockets carefully and methodically. Her initial panic seemed to have passed, and Rhett watched her closely as she turned up a phone, a set of keys, and a red wallet with a zip closure.

Diego moved slower, like perhaps he was considering sticking with his story. He emptied his pockets reluctantly, placing a burner-phone, a keyring, a gravity-knife that would flip open with a snap of the wrist, and a Beretta 9mm handgun. The woman's breath caught sharply, that look of surprise flashing in her eyes again, like she didn't know this guy's real name, sure as hell didn't know he'd come to this little party with a loaded gun.

Well, at least not *that* kind of loaded gun, Rhett thought with a smirk. He'd heard the two of them talking softly as he crept up on Diego. For a former Mexican Special Forces guy and veteran guerilla warrior, the guy had seemed pretty



distracted by whatever this brown-eyed woman had been telling him in those hushed tones which oozed with an intensity, an intimacy, a connection that Rhett would happily exploit.

Rhett glanced at the woman. “What’s your name?”

“Mercy.”

“All right, Mercy. Those security cameras out in the store—are they hooked up to that computer I see on that desk?”

Mercy nodded.

Rhett gestured with his head. “Turn off the cameras, then go to your daughter on the sofa. Both of you stay quiet and everything will be all right. You try anything stupid I’ll shoot the kid first. *Lo entiendes?*”

Mercy flashed a sharp look, then quickly blinked and averted her gaze, nodding in submission, then hurrying over to the computer. Rhett kept the gun close to Diego’s head, trigger half-pressed so that the tiniest squeeze would splatter Diego’s brains all over that steel-topped folding table.

Rhett watched as the camera feeds popped up on the computer screen, then grunted as Mercy turned them all off. There were no cameras in the back room.

Rhett waited for Mercy to walk past them to the sofa. She sat down slowly, her back to the men. The kid was evidently still in dreamland, which was good.

“Good.” Rhett tapped the gun against Diego’s skull. “Push your weapon across the table. Slowly, please.”

Diego obeyed. Rhett glanced around the room once more to make sure there were no cameras he’d missed. He pulled the silk mask off his face. Then, still keeping his gun aimed squarely at Diego’s head, Rhett stepped to his left, dragged the steel table away from Diego so the man was in full view, couldn’t try to reach a hidden weapon beneath his trouser leg or tucked into his boot. Rhett doubted he was carrying anything else, but at the same time he wasn’t going to get close enough to a Special-Forces-trained Zeta killer to do a pat-down.

Rhett pulled up a chair, placed it six feet away from Diego, directly across from the silent stone-faced Zeta. Rhett sat, crossed one leg over the other knee, pointed the gun at Diego’s center mass, looked him directly in the eyes. “Do you know who I am?”

Diego shook his head, said nothing.

Rhett sighed, glanced over towards the sofa, where they could see the back of Mercy's head. "Guess."

Diego's eyes didn't follow Rhett's gaze towards Mercy. They stayed locked on Rhett's face. "CIA."

Rhett nodded. "Which practically makes us partners. The Zetas and the Agency go way back, don't we?"

Diego's eyes stayed cold and expressionless. He shrugged. "What do you want?"

Rhett grinned. "Good. So you're smart enough not to insult me by playing the you-have-the-wrong-man game." He lost the grin, shot a meaningful glance at Mercy again, then locked his own cold eyes onto Diego's. "Look, I know about Northrup Capital, about the money being funneled from American taxpayers to the Zeta-Nation, about how Senator Robinson wants to close those loopholes in the law, turn off your spigot of dirty money." Rhett's face settled to an easy smile. "But you're not going to be able to get to the Senator. You fucked up by allowing one of Benson's off-the-books guys to see you on the *Rivington*. Benson guessed it was you, and he convinced the Senator to beef up security, turn his townhome into a fortress. But you already know that." Rhett paused a beat. "But what you don't know is that last month I

personally convinced the Senator to apply for early Secret Service protection on the basis of his advance poll numbers for the presidential primaries. Secret Service protection is going to come through in a couple of weeks, and then Robinson and his family will be as protected as the President himself. You won't get to him—not without getting yourself killed, anyway. And I presume you aren't the suicidal type of psycho—not yet, at least. How am I doing so far?"

Diego said nothing, but Rhett was astute enough to see the subtle change in his dead eyes.

The man was listening, thinking, calculating.

"What do you want?" Diego said for the second time.

Rhett smiled. "I want to re-establish the Agency's partnership with the Zetas. The administration is getting increasingly worried about all the cheap Chinese-sourced Fentanyl that the Cartels are shipping across the border. I know the Zetas are not exactly buddies with the Colombian and Mexican Cartels. There are ways our two organizations can help each other."

"It starts with me helping you first, I presume?" Diego snorted. "And it ends with a bullet in my head when your dirty

work is done. We both know how a *partnership* with the CIA works.”

Rhett shrugged. “Can’t say you’re that far off base.” He paused a beat, glanced over to the sofa, then flashed a sharp look towards Diego. “But you don’t have a lot of options. Hear me out and not only do they survive this, but you might too. Besides, my *dirty work* might be right up your alley.” He cracked a grin. “I’m guessing you don’t have a particularly soft spot in your heart for John Benson after his team wiped out your Zetas on board the *Rivington*, then brought down Northrup Capital.”

Something flashed behind Diego’s eyes. “You want me to kill John Benson?”

Rhett nodded coolly. “And Martin Kaiser. I’m meeting them at Senator Robinson’s empty townhome tomorrow night. It has to be done there.”

Diego stared in silence, then snorted. “Martin Kaiser is the Director of the CIA. As you so wisely pointed out earlier, I am not the suicidal kind of psycho. Get somebody else to be your patsy, your Lee Harvey Oswald.”

Rhett laughed, then shook his head and sighed. “I’m afraid it has to be you, Diego. Obviously, this can’t come back to bite

me in the ass, which means I can't use any of our local CIA assets—not to kill their own damn Director. Can't trust some freelance gang-hitman either for something this sensitive. No, it has to be you, Diego.” He shrugged. “Look, I'll be honest with you. If you get caught, it's already rumored that you're gunning for the Senator. It would look like Benson and Kaiser got taken out by mistake while you were targeting the Senator's home. You could scream to the heavens that I put you up to it, but it'll just be your word against mine. Good luck getting anyone to take you seriously. You know how finger-pointing plays out when it comes to the Agency. You can't win that game.”

“Oh, yes, I know.” Diego chuckled darkly. “Plausible deniability. You CIA snakes are all the same.” He blinked, took a breath, let it out slow. “At least you are honest about being a double-crossing *puta*.” He stroked his beard, narrowed his eyes. “Why do you want Benson and Kaiser dead? Personal or business?”

“Both.” Rhett's eyes flashed. “Benson is personal. Kaiser is business.”

Diego gazed curiously at Rhett. “What sort of business?”

“That, my friend, is none of *your* business.” Rhett leaned back in his chair. “All you need to know is that if you get this done clean, you will have a very powerful friend in the CIA.” He smiled. “Powerful enough that your new Zeta Nation might be better off with Senator Robinson in the White House than the cemetery.”

Diego shifted in his seat, was silent for a long moment, then exhaled. “The Senator’s townhome is a fortress, just like you said. Windows are bulletproof, doors are reinforced steel. Can you get me inside the house?”

Rhett shook his head. “Too risky.” He cracked a half-grin. “Not just for you but for me too. I know you’d happily take me out along with them if you can. Maybe even *just* me.” He chuckled. “I might be a forked-tongued snake, Diego, but you’re a ten-headed dragon with a trail of blood that rivals Genghis Khan.” He grinned, gestured towards Mercy with his gun. “Does your piece of ass over there know that about you, Diego? Does she know how many tortured souls are waiting for you down in hell?”

Diego’s face darkened as Mercy visibly flinched on the sofa. The sounds of a cranky little girl stirring awake came

through now. Mercy hushed the child, whose name appeared to be Cari. Soon enough the girl settled back down.

Diego looked down at his hands, then nodded and glanced up. “It appears we understand each other well enough. All right. How do you want it done?”

Rhett tapped the gun against his knee, leaned his head back and gazed down his nose at Diego. “I read your file. You started off in Mexican Special Forces. Trained in demolition techniques. Explosives of all kinds. Car-bombs too, from what I know of how the Zetas have taken out Cartel leaders or pesky politicians who won’t accept bribes.” Rhett paused a beat. “Benson and Kaiser will probably arrive in the same car—Benson’s Crown Victoria. The townhome doesn’t have much of a driveway, so they’ll park out front, in the cordoned-off section right outside the home.” He shrugged. “Once we’re all inside the house, you’ll have the car to yourself for maybe thirty minutes—assume twenty to be safe.”

Diego frowned. “What if they come in Kaiser’s car? CIA Director’s vehicle would be blast-proof, armor-plates beneath the car too. You’d need an anti-tank missile to blow up that thing.”



Rhett shook his head. “They’ll take Benson’s car. Kaiser’s would be too recognizable. And it requires a driver, which Kaiser won’t want. Trust me, he’ll want to keep a low profile for this meeting.”

Diego’s frown cut deeper, his eyes narrowing like he was wondering what the hell kind of game Kaiser and Benson and Rhett were playing. “Who else will be there? Senator Robinson still has a couple of his private guys watching the house even when he’s out of town, right?”

“They’ll be pulled off duty before the meeting. Benson’s bringing one of his off-the-books Darkwater guys—former Delta named Jack Wagner. But he’s part of the meeting, so he’ll be inside the house with the rest of us for at least some of the time—I’ll make sure of that.” Rhett shook his head. “Nobody else. Kaiser won’t bring any other CIA guys.”

“Nobody wants any witnesses there, eh?” Diego smiled thinly. “A den of CIA snakes all trying to bite each other. What is this, the O.K. Corral at dusk?”

Rhett showed nothing but a tight smile. “You’ll have to source your own explosives. I don’t want my hands on any part of this chain. A man with your resources and connections should be able to manage that in the next eighteen hours, yes?”

Diego took a breath, then nodded. “How do I contact you?”

Rhett snorted. “You don’t. I don’t want any record that we communicated. Either Benson’s car explodes or it doesn’t. If you pull it off, then leave the country, wait a few months, then find a way to get in touch with me discreetly and we can discuss our future partnership. You’ll know who I am by then.”

Diego frowned. He shot a glance towards Mercy, then back at Rhett. “All right. But the woman and the girl have nothing to do with this—or with me. I’ll do what you want. Even though I know once it’s done the right move for you would be to take me out.” He shrugged with lazy confidence. “But for that you will have to find me again. I got sloppy once. I will be more careful the next time. As for your so-called *partnership*—well, if this plays out and you do become a man of power and influence, then perhaps we can be friends someday.”

Diego narrowed his gaze, and now Rhett saw the dragon in his eyes, heard its fiery hiss in his voice. “But if I do what you ask cleanly and you still choose to come after me, then you will have made yourself a very powerful enemy, remember that.”

“I don’t doubt that for a moment. I also don’t doubt that it would be very difficult to find you again once we part ways tonight—especially now that you know your cover has been compromised.” Rhett held the gun steady, held his gaze even steadier. “So much so that it is a distinct possibility that once this gun is no longer pointed at your head, you will decide to simply disappear again. Yes, I can see that my offer of a potential partnership is tempting, especially since even a man of your abilities must acknowledge how hard it would be to get to Senator Robinson once the Secret Service is involved. Of course, I was counting on my offer being tempting enough for you to follow through.” Rhett gazed languidly towards Mercy and Cari, then sighed and looked back at Diego. “But fate has offered me an insurance policy that will lock you in, take away any consideration that you might reject my offer of friendship. And you know I have to use it.” He shrugged, sighed again. “They’ll be leaving here with me, Diego. I took the precaution of slashing your van’s tires, just in case you’re reckless enough to follow me.” He gazed coolly at Diego. “Once Kaiser and Benson are dead and I’m safely home tomorrow night, Mercy and Cari will be sent safely home too. You have my word.” He glanced at Mercy’s keys on the table.

“You can lock up the store for her. She’ll have to trust you not to rob the register.”

Diego’s eyes blazed, his jaw tightened, his body tensed up to the point where Rhett feared he was going to leap across the six feet of space between them, force Rhett to put a bullet in his head, then walk over and put two more in that mother-and-child combo that could have been an insurance policy but turned out to be just collateral damage.

But Diego stayed in his chair, controlling his rage with the discipline of a man who’d survived in the shadowy world of violence and deception for decades.

Rhett watched Diego’s eyes to make sure the guy was smart enough to stay put. He was, and so Rhett got Mercy and Cari moving, directing his attention to that mother-daughter insurance policy.

And as he walked them out to his Chevy Suburban, his mind drifted to the strange parallel with his own mother-daughter twist in the tale,

Scarlet and India.

Does O’Donnell know, Rhett wondered as he waited impatiently for Mercy to silence her panic-stricken child. Does

India O'Donnell know?

Not unless Benson told her, Rhett reasoned. Nobody else in the world would know—perhaps not even Scarlet, who was dead now anyway.

Which means O'Donnell doesn't know, Rhett assured himself.

Because Benson wouldn't have told her.

And she couldn't possibly remember.

She remembers.

The thought tore through Ice's brain as he tore through the streets of Mumbai chasing the sobbing screaming stumbling woman who was trying to run away from something inside her, inside not just her mind but her body, the memories coming from psychic spaces within her physical being, where they'd been trapped in muscle and tissue, bone and marrow, ligaments and sinews, recorded not in the folds of her brain's memory banks but in the spaces between her body's organs, written in the blood that pumped through her veins.

Ice swore he could feel Indy's trauma in his own body. In this LSD-induced heightened state of hyper-awareness, Ice's own physical consciousness had responded to Indy's with sympathetic vibrations, relational resonance, spiritual synchronicity, cosmic connection, quantum fucking entanglement.

Were those his parents' thoughts or his own?

"Indy!" Ice shouted as he worked his way up to full speed, hurdling over a bewildered stray dog, dodging a grinning street urchin. His boots hammered the dusty pavement, the

dull throb of where she'd kicked him in the groin making every step vibrate through his aching balls. "Indy, stop, damn it!"

She'd stopped screaming, but only because she was running so hard her lungs couldn't handle everything at once. Thankfully she had to slow to turn the corner from their mostly deserted side-street onto the more crowded main road, and Ice turned on the jets and lunged forward, grabbing her by the elbow and managing to pull her back into the quiet side-street before the entire city got them on camera.

"Hey, it's me, Indy, stop, please, dammit, *stop!*" he whisper-shouted against her face, wrapping both arms around her to stop her flailing fists from getting him on the nose again, prevent her kicking legs from tormenting his throbbing balls any further. "Indy, I'm sorry, I'm sorry for forcing you to look at that photo."

"No, you're not!" she hissed through gritted teeth before opening her mouth and snapping at his nose like she wanted to bite it off. "Let me go. I'm fucking losing my mind, Ice. Let go of me or I'll start screaming again and someone will call the police and—"

Ice shut her up with a palm flat across her mouth. He pulled her away from the main road, back down the side-street, ducking out of sight into the recessed doorway of a shuttered store. “You scream and we’re both screwed, Indy. They might have already discovered Scarlet, for all we know. We need to get the hell out of here. Look at me, Indy.” He turned her face upwards, keeping his hand across her mouth, pressing hard so she couldn’t bare her teeth and bite him like the animal she’d turned into as her body released what Ice sensed were memories of violence from so early in her life that they were recorded in every cell of her writhing twisting roiling wrenching flesh. “Indy, open your eyes. Look at me.”

But she couldn’t open her eyes, wouldn’t open her eyes, was thrashing like a wild beast caught in some trap and trying to get loose. Ice himself was stretched to the limits of his own sanity, and he knew they had to get out of there ASAP.

The main road was getting more crowded. Curious passers-by were glancing in their direction. Some of them looked alarmed to see a big muscled man clearly holding a woman against her will, hand clamped across her mouth, arms controlling her wild struggles to break free. Ice figured he had



maybe a few minutes before someone found a street-cop and sent him over to investigate.

And that would not end well—not for any of them, cop included.

Ice had to make a choice, and make it quick.

So with his hand still clamped firmly over her mouth, Ice snaked his other hand around her waist and in one swift silent move heaved her struggling snarling snapping body back to their waiting escape-pod.

The blue Honda's front grill seemed to be frowning at Ice as he got closer with his captive. "Don't look at me like that," Ice snarled at the car, which was glowing bright blue, its iridescent body pulsing like a beast breathing in accusatory anger. "Or we'll take a different car and you're going to sit here alone and dusty, grumpy that you missed out on a grand adventure."

Indy bit his fingers just then, forcing Ice to reflexively pull his hand off her mouth.

Big mistake.

She was too far gone to be rational, her body surging with too many chemicals of both flight and fight, fear and ferocity,

anger and anguish. She howled like a wounded hyena, and although Ice managed to get his bloody fingers clamped over her mouth again, he knew they were dangerously close to being discovered by some curious resident from the surrounding buildings. Thankfully the stores were still shuttered and the apartment windows still closed, with those noisy air-conditioning units merrily chugging away in the humid Mumbai air. But this wasn't a sustainable location, sure as hell wasn't a sustainable situation.

Ice didn't have time to calm Indy down right now—hell, he wasn't even sure if she could be calmed down. She was out of her damn mind, and Ice knew she was going to be hard to control as her body released what had been coiled into its cells for thirty years.

So how the hell was he going to get them to the airport?

Ice himself was going to need every ounce of mental focus just to drive in this compromised state without killing them both along with half of Mumbai—not to mention navigate his way there using a map on that tiny flip-phone while hallucinating on LSD.

He sure as hell couldn't drive with Indy trying to claw his eyes out or leap from a moving car or stick her head out the

window and scream bloody murder or some unpredictable combination of all those things. There was no way a psychedelic clown-car was making it to the airport through Mumbai traffic with a screaming woman who was repeatedly being restrained by a wide-eyed red-faced muscle-bound madman.

Not even the CIA's legendary use of plausible deniability could render that scenario even vaguely plausible, even close to deniable.

And so Ice made another choice, one that he knew was dangerous, was rolling the dice with Indy's broken mind, was risking her sanity if he overestimated her resilience.

But hell, Ice himself was barely holding it together, and if they got picked up by the Mumbai police, it was game over. They'd be connected to that hotel room, linked with the dead Scarlet—all of it while Indy was in this out-of-control state of mind and body.

That would be a hundred times worse for her sanity.

Which meant Ice had to take the chance she was strong enough to handle what he was about to do.

So he hurried around to the backdoor, Indy still captive in his arms, just barely restrained as she clawed and kicked.

“You’re going to hate me for this,” he said as he shoved her somewhat ungracefully into the backseat, then reached across her squirming body for his black duffel. “But it’s the best I can do. We have to get the hell out of here now, and I need to make sure you don’t hurt yourself—or anyone else—while I’m driving.”

Indy’s only response was another savage attempt to kick him in the face and scramble out of the car, presumably to keep running. Ice managed to hold her down with one hand while he unzipped the duffel’s side-pocket, reached inside and felt around for one of his trusty plastic ties.

The pocket was empty.

“Shit,” he growled, remembering that Indy had used up all his plastic ties to hog-tie him to the bathroom fixtures. He was about to slide out the canvas utility belt from his pants when he remembered the roll of black duct-tape he always carried.

Within seconds he found the tape, and just in time too, because Indy kicked him in the gut as her body flailed itself back into a furious frenzy. Ice tightened his ab-muscles, turned

his hips to protect his balls, then rolled out a length of tape and wound it swiftly around her ankles.

He grabbed her wrists and bound them together, but not before Indy connected with a side-swipe to the face that got him on his already throbbing nose, bringing tears to his eyes, almost bringing a bloody sneeze along with it.

Ice was able to hold back the sneeze long enough to get a strip of duct-tape over Indy's mouth. Her eyes bulged as she screamed into the tape, then tried to buck her bound body like a rocking horse attempting to escape someone's playroom.

"It's for your own safety," Ice assured her, stroking her hair clumsily in a useless attempt to soothe her. He pulled his hand quickly away from her head to defend his balls once more from a vicious two-legged attempt. "Fuck, and my safety too."

Indy thrashed her head side to side, her eyes manic and wild, her body still bucking like that rocking-horse. Ice held her body down, wondering how the hell he was going to drive with her going nuts in the backseat. She might seriously hurt herself like this, and once they were in traffic, it would be unmanageable.

And so Ice made another dangerous but necessary decision.

“OK, if you don’t already hate me for dragging you back to this stuffy car, tying you up and gagging you with duct-tape, this should seal the deal.” Ice shrugged out an apology, then grabbed her bound ankles and dragged her out of the car like a writhing thrashing piece of lumber, sliding one arm beneath her torso and lifting her so she wouldn’t thump down onto the pavement.

He managed to get the front door open, somehow got her sitting upright in the front seat, incredibly found a way to hold her in place.

Then Ice took that roll of duct-tape and wound it around her, all the way around her body and the front seat, round and round until she was strait-jacketed and strapped safely to the seat, wrapped like a piggie in a blanket, gagged and gaping, huffing and puffing, struggling and snorting.

But safe and secure.

Physically, at least.

Ice wrapped the roll around her one more time, then tore off the tape, patted the end down over her mummified body,

stepped back and examined his handiwork.

“One day we’re going to look back on this and laugh,” he promised her, trying to smile with lighthearted humor but unable to pull it off.

Because this scenario would *not* be funny to a sober civilian.

And it sure wasn’t funny to Indy.

Ice shook away a rising dread, reminded himself this was the only way. He leaned in and kissed her gently on the forehead, then hurriedly backed off before she snorted on him with a viciousness that he prayed would fade when she sobered up—*if* she ever sobered up from what was probably not a very calming experience for a woman who’d just had her life turned upside down about forty times in the past day—and that was *before* getting dosed with LSD by her assassin-mother, *before* being confronted with the dark truth about her father, a truth that right now was working its way through her wired body.

And now suddenly Ice staggered back as an overwhelming, bursting, raging, admiring love for this brave, strong, special, completely incredible, absolutely amazing woman burned through his heart. The sensation almost

knocked him off his feet, but once it worked through from his heart to his brain, it suddenly brought Ice back under control, snapping his mind back into focus, his need to protect her overcoming every other consideration, forcing him to zero in on a single objective:

Get her to the airport.

Get her on that plane.

Get her home.

Do it now.

So Ice stepped back and carefully closed the door, exhaling when he saw how the tinted glass made it difficult to tell at a glance that the passenger was wrapped in duct-tape instead of a seatbelt. He scanned the street once more, grateful to every god he could name that it was somehow still empty.

Then he was in the driver's seat, reaching under the dash, pulling open the plastic cover beneath the steering-wheel console, finding the wires he needed, crossing them as he pressed the clutch and tapped the accelerator, heaving out a relieved sigh when the engine coughed and sputtered and then jolted to life.



He revved the engine and then let it run in neutral so it could charge the battery. He'd checked the fuel earlier, before selecting this car. Quick glance at the gauge told him he hadn't been hallucinating earlier—there was enough to get them to the airport.

“Going to get us there as fast as I safely can,” he said to Indy while pulling open his phone and getting the clunky-but-adequate maps application running.

The route was a straight shot on a single highway once Ice got out of downtown South Mumbai. He studied the map to memorize it, using the hyper-focus of the drug to burn the route into his brain—which was already hardwired for mapping out a route in unfamiliar territory, thanks to relentless Delta training. It also helped that it was still relatively early in the day and traffic would be light. Ice had read that people started work late out here, which meant rush hour wouldn't begin for another couple of hours.

He switched from the map to his messages, silently thanking Jack for thinking ahead and sending him an overhead satellite image of the Mumbai airport, a clumsily-drawn yellow circle marking the gate where Air India 217 would be boarding. It also showed the perimeter walls, with red circles

marking out the guard stations. It would be Indian Army personnel manning those stations, and although a Delta man could sneak into Fort Knox in broad daylight, Ice had a squirming duct-taped piece of very precious carry-on baggage to consider. He wasn't getting past armed guards at any of the gates lining the fenced-in perimeter.

He'd have to go over the fence.

But where?

Then Ice noticed the green arrow Jack had scrawled onto the image.

"Jackpot." Ice grinned, nodding wildly when he saw that Jack had marked out the baggage-cart parking lot towards the back of the airport grounds, near a row of maintenance hangars. The parking lot had charging stations for the electric vehicles, and there were dozens of unused electric-powered baggage-trains lined up haphazardly. The area was along a high chain-link fence which Ice could probably get them over without being seen.

He'd have to, because there was no other option.

It occurred to him that the baggage-carts were also the only way Ice could get across the open airport grounds in

daylight. No way he could simply walk all the way to the Air India 217 gate with Indy draped over his shoulder without getting arrested or perhaps just shot twice in the head, no questions asked.

Ice placed the flip-phone on the dash just in case, the maps application clearly visible because his pupils were so dilated they were letting in a wider spectrum of light. He glanced once more at Indy, who was still squirming, her eyes still frantic. She was breathing all right, and the duct-tape was holding her snugly in place. Ice's heart wrenched when he imagined her state of mind, but there was nothing he could do right now except get them to the airport quickly and safely.

So he gunned the engine and pulled out, vision riveted on traffic and pedestrians, mind completely focused on the singular task of getting through the twisty crowded downtown streets onto the straight open highway, the yellow brick road that would lead them back to Kansas.

Or was it Wonderland.

Neverland?

Who the hell knew. He wasn't a fairy-tale expert.

He shifted into third gear, then fourth, and before Ice knew it he was relaxing behind the wheel, decades of muscle-memory taking over as he turned and twisted through the cacophony of cars and trucks and scooters and rickshaws. Minutes later he saw the first signboards with smiling arrows pointing to the highway, and a few stop-lights later he was racing the engine and cruising along that yellow brick road that would hopefully lead them to Wonderland and not Neverland.

Forty-six minutes later a sign informed Ice that the he was exiting Neverland and approaching Wonderland. Or Kansas. Whatever. All he knew in his ultra-focused psychedelic stupor was that he'd just driven past a sign that said AIRPORT ARRIVALS.

“Please let this be real,” he muttered, driving past the DEPARTURES ramp, then taking a turn marked SERVICE ROAD, which should get him close to that spot in the fence Jack had marked with a green arrow.

Ice slowed down now, peering through the windscreen as the Honda trundled past boxy concrete buildings towards the fence beyond which lay the baggage-cart parking lot. He saw the lot, slowed down to a crawl, drove past the spot so he could get a lay of the land before circling back.

Security cameras were mounted on the fence at regular intervals, but only two were close enough to care about. Ice circled back to the right spot, then pulled off the road near a vacant lot which appeared to be rapidly transforming into an unofficial stray-dog shelter. He rumbled to a stop, scattering a

handful of Mumbai's ubiquitous strays who'd been lounging on the uneven scrubgrass-covered ground.

He glanced over at Indy, who'd stopped trying to break free but only because her muscles were probably aching from the effort. Her eyes were now glassy and distant. Wide open but also closed to the real world in a way that worried Ice.

“Almost there, Indy,” he said softly, reaching out and placing his palm gently against her cheek. She flinched wildly away from him, like his touch had seared her skin. Her eyes darted around like pinballs in her head before dimming to that terrifyingly vacant stare, and Ice knew he needed to hurry, needed to get her untied and safe in the belly of that plane.

So they could start the journey back.

Not just the physical journey back to the United States.

But also the mental journey back to sanity.

If that was even within reach for Indy anymore, Ice worried with rising anxiety, trying to force away alarming memories of what he'd read about LSD-trips gone bad, the mind-bending drug leaving unfortunate victims stranded far from the shores of sanity, their brains unable to find their way back to reality.

“I’ll be back,” Ice said, popping open his door, then getting out and circling around to the back of the vacant lot near the fence, trying to act casual just in case someone was actively watching these camera-feeds.

He got close to the fence, pretended to stretch, then let out an exaggerated sigh before unzipping his fly and taking a leak into a dry patch of scrubgrass that could use some watering.

He watched the cameras as he finished up, betting that it wasn’t particularly unusual for some dude to be pissing in that vacant lot. Mumbai wasn’t exactly known for its adequate public bathroom facilities.

Ice waited for the camera closest to him to complete its slow swivel, then finished quickly, zipped up safely, and darted to the fence, getting there while still in the camera’s temporary blind spot.

Ice crouched down against the bottom of the fence, crab-walked until he was directly beneath the camera. He pulled out a Leatherman multi-tool from his cargo flap, opened up the needle-nosed plier option.

Glancing around to make sure nobody was watching, Ice stood quickly and shimmied up the chain-link fence. Then in one quick move he shoved the sharp narrow pliers into the tiny

space between two metal plates of the camera-base, twisting the joint until the camera stopped swiveling.

He could have simply smashed the camera lens, but that would cause the screen to go blank in the security center. Much better to jam the swivel mechanism. It wouldn't be as noticeable to a zoned-out security-guy staring at a hundred tiny black-and-white squares on a computer monitor.

Ice dropped back down to the ground, crept over to the second camera, waited for his chance, then disabled its swivel mechanism the same way.

Now confidence surged in him. He'd made it to the airport, disabled the cameras, was just a chain-link fence away from a sea of waiting electric vehicles with boxy baggage cars attached. Thankfully Mumbai was in the path of South Asia's legendary annual monsoon rains, so all the electric vehicles were covered, which would hopefully obscure Ice well enough to get them beneath the Air India jumbo-jet's open belly.

Ice hurried back to the Honda, grabbed his duffel from the backseat, slung it across his body and pulled the straps tight, leaving both arms free to carry Indy.

He pulled open the front door, hope rising in him that maybe she'd pulled herself back to the here and now, that



perhaps the manic surge of memories had worked itself through her well enough for her to walk properly, get over the fence if he boosted her up.

But the rising hope came crashing down when he got the door open and looked at her eyes.

She was catatonic.

Breathing regular but shallow.

Eyes wide but sightless.

“Fuck!” Ice shouted, panic ripping through him. Suddenly he was second-guessing every decision he’d made.

Maybe he’d overestimated her mental resilience.

Perhaps he’d underestimated the impact of releasing those physically-stored memories.

Hell, maybe he should’ve just kept her in that hotel room, holed up in there with that DO NOT DISTURB sign hanging outside, taken the chance that nobody else was going to come after them for at least ten or twelve hours—enough time for the drug to wear off.

Instead Ice had rolled the dice with Indy’s sanity.

Made a choice that maybe wasn’t his to fucking make.

But staying in that room could have turned out worse—after all, Indy would have been forced to spend ten hours staring at her dead mother. And even if she handled that, staying in that room in their compromised states of mind could very easily have made them paranoid, triggered them to do something even more risky. It would very likely have ended with them both in a Mumbai prison, separated and sequestered, at the center of a murder investigation and an international incident. And there was no guarantee that either of them would have emerged sane—or even alive—at the end of that chain of choices.

Anyway, they were here now, and there was no choice but to go forward. Although time felt elastic in this state of mind, Ice couldn't turn back the clock, didn't get a do-over for decisions he'd made on instinct.

Instincts that were almost certainly compromised by the drug.

“Indy,” he whispered, leaning close and carefully pulling the tape off her lips. “Hey, do you hear me?”

Indy stared straight ahead, unblinking and unresponsive. Now Ice was starting to lose it himself. The LSD would still

be surging pretty strong, so if she was sitting glassy-eyed like a zoned-out zombie, it was not a good sign.

He was losing her.

Maybe he'd already lost her.

Urgency fired Ice's blood, sparked every nerve, awakened every instinct. He had to get her to that plane, get them safely tucked away, get to work on bringing her back from wherever her demons had dragged her.

Ice whipped out his knife and cut through the duct-tape holding her to the seat. He sliced through the strips binding her wrists and ankles, put the knife away, leaned forward across the front seat, then carefully hoisted her out, cradling her against his body with utmost care, like she was delicate and damaged.

Ice's heart sank even further as Indy hung limp in his arms, her head lolling back, those wide wired eyes still vacant and empty, dead and desolate.

Ice swallowed his panic, forced his mind to go through a checklist of tasks that would get them to that plane.

He glanced into the car to see if they'd left anything. Checked that his duffel was secured to his body. He'd already

wiped down the steering wheel and the door handles. Cameras were still pointing off to the sides, leaving a wide section of fence in a safe blind-spot.

Everything checked out, and now Ice was running to the fence with Indy in his arms, that urgency spurring him on, the drug still boiling his blood, racking his reason. It was only when he got to the fence and carefully set her down on a clean patch of scrubgrass that Ice looked up at the looming fence and realized there was no way he was climbing over with Indy in his arms.

“Shit,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck furiously. He could shimmy himself all the way up using momentum, grab the top of the fence with both hands, haul himself over without a problem.

But Indy’s catatonic state posed a big fucking problem.

He couldn’t toss her over without risking her neck.

He didn’t have the tools to cut through the thick steel mesh.

Shit, had they come this far just to be stopped by a fence?

Now a flash of movement caught Ice’s attention. He whipped his head to the left, ready to protect, ready to defend,

ready to pounce.

But instead Ice himself was pounced upon.

It was one of the stray dogs, mouth open wide, pink tongue lolling out.

And tail wagging ten times a second.

Ice chuckled as the tan-colored dog scampered up to them and did a little welcome dance. The city was overrun by stray dogs, but the creatures lived side-by-side with millions of humans, and they were friendly like house-pets. Ice supposed that dogs who didn't play nice with humans were quickly weeded out of the canine population.

Urban evolution.

Survival of the friendliest.

And this friendly furball went right past Ice to Indy, nuzzling against her neck as she lay by his side.

Ice tried to pull the critter away.

Then Ice pulled his hand away instead.

Because Indy's eyes suddenly lit up, snapped into focus, shone with a light that gave Ice hope that she wasn't lost yet,

that there was still someone in there who could recognize, react, respond.

Respond to love.

Unconditional love, Ice thought when he saw Indy's fingers ruffle the dog's furry neck as the animal crooned in delight, rolling over onto its back, turning its head towards Indy's face, staring into her eyes with the unassuming innocence of a creature that lived completely in the flow of the physical, focused entirely in its body, just like every animal other than the human beast.

The human beast which was cursed with the burden of abstract thought, a brain that could spin itself stories of the future and the past, a mind which could lose itself in trickery and trauma.

And maybe the only way back for Indy's traumatized mind was through the flesh, through the physical, through the warmth of touch, the safety of unconditional love, affection which gave of itself freely, understanding that love was a strange form of treasure where the more you gave away the more you got back.

So Ice sat back and watched in silence as Indy petted the creature almost absentmindedly, like her body was reacting to

the furry physicality of the dog even though her mind was still locked behind some wall erected to protect itself from memories that couldn't be processed by the brain, could only be worked through by the body.

Indy giggled now as the dog licked her nose. She seemed oblivious to her surroundings other than the warm friendliness of the animal. Ice glanced at his watch, then swept his gaze along the fence to make sure they hadn't been spotted. It looked clear on both sides of the steel mesh, but it still wasn't clear how Ice was going to get Indy to that other side.

“Can you stand?” Ice placed his hand on her arm, then quickly pulled it back when Indy flinched again like she'd been burned. She whipped her head towards him, her eyes going wide like she'd forgotten who he was, like maybe that part of her brain wasn't accessible right now.

Ice swallowed hard, the urgency constricting his throat. Right now the baggage-cart parking lot was empty, but sooner or later someone was bound to show up here. They had a window of opportunity right now, but it wouldn't stay open long.

“We need to move, Indy.” Ice tried to keep his voice calm, but the urgency tightened his tone. “Indy?”

No response.

Ice forced a smile, stayed crouched by her side, watching Indy play with the dog as she lay on her back on the scrubgrass. Clearly this was therapeutic for her, the friendly animal comforting her in a physical way that didn't require her brain to do any thinking work.

Ice gave her a few moments, then got back to pushing forward. "Hey, we need to move, Indy. Listen, we're going to stand right here up against this fence. I'm going to boost you up to the top. See if you can grab the top and hoist yourself over. Hang down on the other side, then drop feet-first and wait for me there."

Indy didn't even turn in his direction. Ice gently touched her elbow, but she whipped her arm away again, gasping like she'd been shocked, had definitely forgotten who Ice was, maybe even forgotten who she was.

Ice sat back down on his ass, sighed heavily, then glanced at the grinning dog. "Got any ideas, Pooch?"

Pooch sat up now, cocked his head and stared at Ice, its furry face furrowing in a quizzical frown. "Sure," it seemed to say. "Follow me."



Ice stared as Pooch stood up, its tail wagging in a way that wasn't just random friendliness. There was an intentionality to the wag, and when Pooch licked Indy's face and then backed up two steps and let out an urgent *yip*, Ice sighed again and shook his head because obviously the drug was making him imagine a talking dog asking them to follow his wagging tail.

Pooch went down on his front paws, let out another impatient bark, then pranced about like Ice imagined a unicorn might do in this rainbow-colored hallucination that he was obviously in right now.

But then Indy sat up suddenly, staring at the dog like maybe she was in that same hallucination, deep in the same delusion.

“All right then,” Ice said with a shrug. “Guess we're following you, Pooch.”

He watched with a vague mixture of disbelief and amusement as Pooch hurried along the length of the fence, Indy crawling after him on all fours. Ice scratched his stubble, then shrugged again and hopped on the crazy train, following the two four-legged beasts, taking up the rear, glancing cautiously around to make sure nobody was watching this insanity, checking his position relative to the stuck cameras to

make sure this crawling party of three kept within the extended blind spot.

“End of the line for us soon, Pooch,” Ice said as they approached the second jammed camera. “We can’t—”

Ice stopped mid-sentence.

Pooch was gone.

Had he imagined the whole thing?

Hallucinated the dog?

Nope, there was Pooch again, wagging his tail, grinning like a goon, head cocked to the left like he was wondering why the silly humans were on the wrong side of the fence.

“Wait, how are you on the other side?” Ice cocked his own fuzzy head when he realized that Pooch and he were now separated by the fence. “What the hell kind of hallucination is this?”

And then Ice understood.

He understood when he saw Indy’s butt stick up in the air, then slowly disappear into the ground as she wriggled and wormed her way along the sunken path of paw-dug dirt that tunneled beneath the fence.

“No way,” Ice muttered, scrambling forward and grabbing the bottom of the fence-mesh, pulling it up with all his strength to make sure Indy didn’t get snagged on the bottom. She made it through all the way, grinning like a child at play, totally lost in her own physicality, like this dog was some guiding angel sent down to lead them across the chasm between heaven and hell. “No fucking way.”

Grinning in disbelief, Ice examined the sunken tunnel-space beneath the fence. He hadn’t noticed it earlier, but then again he’d been focused on the cameras. It was fairly low profile, hidden from view by a mound of scrubgrass. It looked well worn, like it had been carved out by the front paws of dozens of dogs over months, if not years.

Ice shook his head to get the amazement out of it. He glanced at Pooch, just to make sure the dog was real. Then he reminded himself that LSD was known to make ordinary events seem symbolic and magical. There were a million stray dogs in this city. This wasn’t symbolic or magical. Just dumb luck. Get your ass moving, he told himself.

And move his ass he did. It was a tight squeeze, but Ice managed to wriggle and squirm his big body beneath the fence to the other side. He sat up, dusted himself off, shaking off the

last bits of incredulity until suddenly he was grinning just like Pooch and Indy, Ice's own big pink tongue hanging out like he was one of them, one of the pack, four-legged and furry.

Then suddenly Ice heard voices.

Not in his head, best he could tell.

Immediately he snapped back into urgent focus, ready to clamp his palm over Indy's mouth in case she got spooked.

But Indy stayed silent. Her face was animated, her eyes no longer glassy and vacant. But she wasn't back all the way yet, and that made Ice's gut tighten with the same anxious worry that although her staying quiet was useful right now, it was still a really bad sign, that maybe she wouldn't come back all the way even when she sobered up, that maybe he'd fucked up real bad by putting her in a duct-tape strait-jacket and tying her to a car seat while making some dumb joke about how they would laugh about this later.

Nobody was fucking laughing now.

Except the owners of those voices, Ice thought when he heard chuckles mixed in with coos and clucks and other strange sounds of affection. He frowned, then suddenly

understood when Pooch ran towards the voices, tail wagging with furious recognition.

Several more stray dogs appeared out of seemingly nowhere, all of them headed towards the voices, which had stopped at the far side of the baggage-cart lot, safely out of view. Moments later Ice heard the clatter of metal food-bowls being lined up on the tarmac, followed by slurping and crunching as the dogs devoured what appeared to be their regularly scheduled breakfast.

So it wasn't magic at all, Ice told himself again. Just dumb luck that we got here just when Pooch and his buddies would have crawled through that hole for breakfast anyway.

Yeah, Ice told himself with the same sort of firmness he'd use when arguing with his parents about their latest woo-woo theories. They weren't being led by guardian angels or friendly dog-spirits. They'd just gotten lucky.

And the thing about luck was that it tended to run out.

Just like time tended to run out, Ice thought as he glanced at his watch and wondered how long those dog-loving airport workers would hang around.

They hung around just long enough to suck down a couple of cigarettes, judging from the acrid smell of smoke. Then Ice saw them sauntering off towards a distant aircraft hangar, their semi-pet stray dogs following them haphazardly with full bellies and wagging tails.

Ice waited until the men disappeared through the gaping hangar opening. Then he glanced at Indy, his heart sinking when he saw that vacant glassy look creeping back into her eyes.

He smiled, trying to convey warm reassurance. She didn't seem to notice. She just sat there on the ground, her legs pulled up against her chest, arms hugging her knees, body rocking back and forth in a way that unsettled Ice, made him yearn to pull her against his body, hold her close and tight, wrap her in his arms and do whatever he could to make her feel safe, protected, cared for, loved.

“You are loved,” Ice whispered, his heart wrenching in sympathy for what this woman had been forced to confront over the past few hours, would be forced to confront every day for the rest of her damn life. “You are loved now, and you will be loved every day of your life. You hear me, Indy? I love you, and I swear I will do everything in my power to heal what

your sick twisted piece-of-shit parents broke in you.” He swallowed as a surge of raw anger burned his throat. “Starting with breaking Rhett Rodgers into a hundred pieces, making sure that fucker never heals, not in the flesh, not in the spirit, not in the afterlife, not in the underworld. I promise you that, Indy.”

Indy’s eyelids fluttered. She blinked once.

Ice thought he saw something flicker behind those dilated pupils that had seemed eerily empty. Was he getting through? He didn’t need to get through to her all the way right now, just enough to get her to safety, get them to where he could focus every ounce of attention and energy on bringing her all the way back.

Back to him.

Where she belonged.

He knew it as surely as he knew anything, as he’d ever known anything, as he ever could know anything.

He prayed Indy knew it too.

He prayed it was locked away somewhere inside her.

And he prayed he’d be able find it before it was too late.

Ice smiled warmly again, then cautiously reached out towards Indy's white-knuckled grip on her knees, placing his hand over hers gently, carefully, lovingly.

She stiffened, but didn't draw her hand away, didn't flinch his hand off her.

Ice stayed silent and still, letting their simple physical connection linger. He imagined energy flowing through that point of contact, and he closed his eyes and let it flow, pushing away the mortifying thought that Mom and Dad would be giving each other hippie-high-fives if they were watching.

And maybe they *were* watching, Ice thought as he considered the chance encounter with that dog—which seemed to have moved on with its life almost as fast as it had entered theirs, like it understood that coming back to Indy tail-a-wagging on this side of the fence might give them away.

Did you guide that dog to us, Ice asked nobody and everybody. He swallowed hard and shook his head to clear it, suppressed an embarrassed smile, reminded himself that there were no ghosts guiding them, no spirits leading them, no angels protecting them, no demons haunting them.

Ice gazed into Indy's hauntingly vacant eyes, his jaw tightening. But maybe there was a demon haunting Indy, he



thought.

And its name was Rhett fucking Rodgers.

The anger burned a path of mental clarity through Ice's brain. He snapped back to that hyper-aware state, where the drug was working for him instead of against him. He was still holding Indy's hand, and now he tugged gently, drawing her slowly to her feet as he rose with her, making sure he kept that physical connection going between them, like their linked hands and intertwined fingers was the only way Ice could communicate with Indy right now.

"Now stay with me," he whispered, leading Indy gently but quick. She followed like a sleepwalker, helpless and clueless in a way that sparked a fiercely protective fire in Ice's heart, emotion so strong it overflowed in warm waves that rushed through his body. "You're safe with me, Indy. We're almost there. Almost home."

He led her through the sea of silent baggage-carts, selecting one near the edge. It was plugged into a charging station, steady green light promising a full battery. Still holding on to Indy's limp hand, Ice unplugged the cart, then led her to the open passenger side of the covered front two-seater bench.

Ice got in first, making sure he maintained that physical contact with Indy like their lives depended on it. He hunched forward beneath the metal roof, slid behind the wheel, then made sure Indy got settled beside him.

He flicked on the power, exhaling when the cart hummed to life. There were no doors on this thing, just a roof and a plastic windscreen to protect the driver and passenger from rain. The plastic was scarred and grimy—hopefully enough that a casual glance from outside wouldn't blow their flimsy cover.

“Hang on.” Ice pressed one of the two foot-pedals. The cart lurched a bit before Ice got a feel for the accelerator. Soon he was steering it steady and silent past those aircraft hangars.

They passed a row of smaller propeller-planes before getting to the busier section where the morning's passenger flights were prepping for takeoff.

Ice made sure not to look left or right through the open side doors, certainly not directly at any of the distant airport workers doing everything from loading baggage and dragging fuel-hoses to waving air-traffic flags and sliding stopper-blocks under aircraft wheels. All Special Forces men were trained to become invisible even in plain sight. One of the

tricks was to avoid looking directly at someone from whom you wanted to stay hidden. There was a strange instinct that evolution had put into the brain-stem which warned you when you were being watched, stalked, hunted. Looking directly at someone often triggered that instinct, and so Ice stared straight ahead like he was driving a golf cart on a wide-open lawn.

“There she is,” Ice whispered, squeezing Indy’s hand gently as they glided past an empty gate, two gates down from the spot Jack had circled on that digital map. A massive Boeing 747 was parked and ready.

The logo on the tail clearly said AIR INDIA.

Ice exhaled, thanking Jack under his breath. He slowed as he got closer, leaning forward and peering through the plastic windscreen towards the plane’s underbelly.

Those summers working baggage at JFK all those years ago paid off now as Ice noted with exhilarated relief that the conveyor belt was still attached to the open baggage hold but there were no workers present. Exactly what he’d hoped for, wished for, maybe even prayed for.

He checked his watch. An hour before takeoff. International flight, which meant most passengers would already have checked in—and that meant most of the baggage

had already been loaded. The ground crew had left the conveyor belt in place to load up straggling baggage from any late check-ins or standby passengers cleared at the last minute.

Ice waited a few minutes, scanning the perimeter to make sure it was clear. Then he steered them past the Air India plane, stopping the cart off to the side, out of the aircraft's way, beneath the covered passenger jetway. Hopefully it would stay unnoticed until the aircraft pulled away from the gate. After that Ice didn't give a shit. Once they were airborne, the plane wasn't stopping until its wheels touched down on U.S. soil.

Fifteen hours flight-time, Ice thought as he switched off the cart, then reached for his duffel bag. He'd raided the hotel mini-bar, stuffing three large bottles of water along with snack-bags of nuts and dried fruits and some strange-looking Indian curly crispy things that were probably delicious if not nutritious.

"All right, we're moving." Ice squeezed Indy's hand, then led her out of the cart onto the tarmac. She stumbled as she stepped off, but Ice steadied her against his body, making damn sure his fingers were still locked tight through hers. He waited a beat, scanned the area one last time, then focused

directly on the unattended conveyor belt until everything else faded away to blurry background. “Come on.”

Ice led them straight to the open underbelly, making sure he paced it just right that the movement wouldn't look rushed to a casual observer. No sudden moves, he warned himself. Pretend like you belong here, like this is your aircraft, like this is your airport, your conveyor belt, your baggage compartment, your story.

The story spun through Ice's swirling senses, his heart slowing down when they got to the conveyor belt without hearing cries of STOP or its Hindi equivalent.

Without pausing to thank the gods, ghosts, spirits, angels, and demons for getting them this far, Ice flicked the switch on the conveyor engine-base to turn on the heavy-duty belt, lifted Indy into his arms, then hopped onto the belt and let it carry them up into the gaping maws of this grinning metal monster.

Darkness had never been more welcome, and Ice exhaled in a rush when they got to the top of their magic carpet ride and he got them both off without a hitch and found the conveyor belt switch at the top end of the machine and turned it off.

And suddenly they were there, safe in the dimly lit baggage hold, surrounded by silent luggage of all sizes and shapes, soft-skin leather and hard-shell plastic, Louis Vuitton and Samsonite, odd-shaped tubes and drop-cloth draped cases.

Now Ice relaxed his extreme focus, exhaling again as he scanned the silent space for a spot to set up camp.

But then something broke the safe silence.

Ice tightened immediately, snapping his head towards the far reaches of the cavernous baggage hold. He listened, praying it was just the sounds of passengers trudging through the aisles above their heads.

It wasn't.

The sounds were definitely coming from way back in the baggage hold.

Baggage workers shifting luggage around?

Maintenance crew inspecting something?

Random terrorists who'd selected this flight out of every other possible flight on every other possible day?

Ice cursed inwardly, savage amusement accompanying the thought that hell, the third option might actually be the best—if they were terrorists, Ice could just break their necks and

stow them away in the back, no problem, no harm done to real humans.

Workers and crew were a different matter.

Shit.

He should have known it wouldn't be *this* easy.

“Easy,” he whispered when he felt Indy try to pull her hand away, like she was coming out of her stupor. Yeah, Ice desperately wanted to see the light come back to her vacant eyes, but maybe not for another few minutes. “Indy, I need you to stay—”

Ice stopped when he saw that light flicker in her eyes, and when she tugged at his hand again, Ice realized she wasn't trying to pull away from him.

She was trying to lead him.

Lead him towards those strange scuffling sounds.

“All right, but I go first,” Ice said quietly, holding her hand firmly, pulling her back and switching positions so he was in front of her, shielding her from the unknown beasts in the dark.

And beasts they were, Ice realized when they got past the last of the luggage to where the compartment was roomier and

warmer, the scent of animal musk heavy in the air, the gentle sounds of snorts and grunts coming from the mildly sedated furry passengers headed halfway across the world, presumably with their human companions seated above with seatbelts fastened and tray-tables tucked.

Indy gasped as she moved past Ice, dragging him by the arm to the open space in the center of what appeared to be the pet-section of this passenger jet. The area was lined with spacious travel-cages, each lashed securely to the metal frames on the side-walls.

Ice counted six cages in total, all occupied by lazily lounging canine tenants. “Well, shit. Looks like we’re travelling with a bunch of returning American ex-pats or Indian pet-lovers moving to America with their best friends.” He smiled and shook his head, not sure what to make of it—not just the situation but the feeling in his heart when he saw Indy once again show signs of sanity in those wild-but-vacant eyes.

Ice’s heart beat wildly as his mind spun up images of his laughing parents in the form of grinning ghosts, snickering spirits. He tried to tell himself that a Boeing 747 seated almost



five hundred passengers, which made it entirely reasonable that six pets were on board.

This isn't magical, he told himself sternly.

This isn't mystical, he reminded himself hotly.

Maybe this isn't even real, he suggested to himself in a last-ditch attempt to rationalize what felt like fate, to reason away what felt like destiny, to push away what felt like providence.

But then Indy led him to the center of that U-shaped magical horseshoe of furry friendliness, looked up into his eyes, pulled him down to the floor dead center of what felt like a vortex of safe, loving physical energy.

And Ice couldn't tell himself a damn thing anymore.

He just followed her lead, let himself slip into this strange psychic space of peaceful physical energy, where words were meaningless and thoughts were trivial and the intelligence of the mind was overshadowed by the wisdom of the body.

And now they were on the floor, lying pressed together like two spoons on a padded drop-cloth, Indy's face turned away from his as Ice held her from behind, his body warming hers like a blanket, his eyes closed just like hers, his heart

open just like hers as the baggage-doors closed on the outside world and the throttles opened with a comforting rumble and their magical mystical capsule began to move, began to roll, began to rise.

Indy felt herself rise. Not just physically but in some other unnamable way. She was only vaguely aware of her specific surroundings, but something had definitely changed, was still changing.

She tried to move her body, then realized she was connected to another body.

His body.

Indy tried to speak his name but the words wouldn't come. Her vision was just nonsensical colors, swirling patterns of textural luminosity. But the colors were brighter now, like something was pushing away that overwhelming dark cloud that had dropped heavy and harsh over her, suffocating her from the inside, throttling her from within.

She curled up tighter in her fetal position, shut her eyes, panic briefly rising up her throat that the dark shroud of physical emotion would suffocate her again, like it had once so long ago, back when her brain was still forming, her eyes barely able to focus.

Suddenly she got a flash of what had transpired. Not a visual memory but just that shadowy sensation of being smothered, shut down, silenced.

Indy tried to speak, but her voice had been taken from her by the sudden release of those smothering memories recorded in her flesh decades ago. She understood what had happened, even though some faint inner voice still reminded her she was on a drug and she couldn't trust anything right now, certainly not memories which couldn't be seen, only felt.

But she trusted these arms around her, Indy thought as she pushed her spoon-curved body back against his, felt him hold her tighter, the sort of tightness that was safe not suffocating, protective not painful, releasing not restricting.

Now her body began to relax, slow and gradual, from the inside out, starting with her innermost depths. She closed her eyes and let her mind follow this strange opening-up process, like a flower unfolding its fresh new petals in anticipation of spring, an infant uncurling its tiny fists in anticipation of love.

The kind of love that the body experienced as safety, shelter, security.

Unconditional love.

A gasp emerged from Indy's lips as she felt their bodies connecting in the strangest way, starting from the inside out even though the contact was only skin deep, just on the surface. She didn't understand it but she accepted it, welcomed it, opened herself up to it like that unfurling flower, that awakening infant.

She sighed out a breath as her senses expanded, like her awareness was being extended by this strange joining of her body with his. She listened in awe to their deepest physical processes, was acutely aware of not just two beating hearts and four breathing lungs but trillions of chattering cells, those microscopic fractals of life communicating excitedly with each other in the deepest levels of their shared body-consciousness, making it clear that even the tiniest particle was bursting with life, overflowing with joy, yearning to expand, aching to experience.

Experience love.

Physical love.

“Where are we?” she whispered now, her eyelids fluttering open, letting in splinters of sight, fragmented forms that vaguely resembled physical objects that had names in the real world. “Are those ... cages?”

He moved against her from behind. She felt him raise his head. She tried to turn to look at him but found she couldn't move. She did remember his name, though. That was probably a good sign, wasn't it?

“Relax,” Ice whispered, his breath swirling through her hair. “Yeah, those are cages. We're on the plane, Indy. Pressurized temperature-controlled pet-safe area of the cargo hold.”

Indy frowned as those cages came into clearer focus. There were furry beasts stirring behind the square chain-link windows of their roomy carrier-cages. She smiled as one of the creatures raised its head and pricked up its ears. “Wait, why are there so many dogs on this flight?”

“You tell me. You led us here.” Ice lay back down, his face nestled against the side of her neck, arms holding her close. He chuckled into her neck. His breath tickled. “It's just six dogs. Five hundred passengers. The math seems reasonable.”

Indy smiled at the lazy-eyed dog, which appeared to be a Labrador-Collie mix. “Glad at least one of us can do math right now. How long was I passed out?”

Ice hesitated. “You weren't.” He stiffened briefly. “You don't remember anything about how we got here from the

hotel?”

Indy scrunched up her face. It hurt, just like her body hurt. Every muscle ached, she realized. The sort of aching that came after intensely draining physical activity, like that first week of CIA training at the Farm, or that awful half-marathon she'd signed up for in college, had run without training, ending up with jelly-spaghetti legs the rest of the week.

“I remember the hotel room,” she said softly, closing her eyes, then opening them quickly because the memory of her mother was less vivid when her eyes were open. “I remember *leaving* the hotel room. We drank tea. We found a car. And then ...” Her eyelids snapped open. “Ohmygod, we were ... we were kissing. We were in the car, in the backseat, kissing and ... and then you stopped. Again. Playing your annoying game of dominance—or at least what you seem to think is dominance.”

Ice groaned. “Was hoping you'd forgotten that part.”

Indy shook her aching head. “Nope. Add it to the list of traumatic memories. Thanks, Ice.”

Ice chuckled against her neck. He was silent a long moment. “Do you remember anything after that?” His voice was strained, his body stiffening again.

Indy's temples throbbed violently. Her body shuddered involuntarily, those aching muscles spasming as that dark background threatened to overwhelm her inner landscape once again.

"Yes," she managed to say. "That photograph ... it ... it did something to me, Ice. Triggered something, but not a memory. Not one that I could see, at least. It's almost like my body remembers but my brain doesn't. Something like that."

Ice nodded against her, his arms drawing her closer. He sighed out a breath. "There's some pseudoscientific theory about how memories can be stored in cells and tissues of the body, not just the brain. Especially trauma from that early in life." He kissed her neck gently. "But you scared the crap out of me, Indy. Thought I'd lost you."

You still might lose me, came the dreadful thought from somewhere inside her.

Indy tried to smile, but that dark nameless thing was creeping over her again, forcing her lips into a tight grimace. She gulped back the thickness that was starting to constrict her throat again, blinked desperately to bring back the soothing view of those peacefully dozing dogs.



But her vision was going dark alarmingly fast, the real world fading out as that suffocating shroud began to blanket her again. Her body began to spasm, her calf-muscles locking painfully, her fingers curling into claws, her head pounding like ten thousand hammers trying to break out through her skull, her gut wrenching like coiling snakes, throat retching like those snakes were trying to all slither out at once, jamming the exits, blocking the pathways, no escape, not now, not ever.

And suddenly Indy's body shuddered violently, her teeth chattering, vision blurring as her head slammed back against Ice.

“Oh, shit, Indy. Hold on. I've got you.” Ice grabbed her tight from behind as her body started to thrash. She felt him cushion her head against his chest, cup her chin gently but firmly. Her mouth opened and closed rapidly, drool pouring out the sides of her lips.

Now she felt Ice slide his fingers between her teeth so she wouldn't bite her tongue off. Indy wasn't sure if she was having a seizure or if she was dying, but it felt like both those things happening at once. Her teeth cut viciously into Ice's fingers but he didn't flinch, didn't loosen his secure grip on

her body, held her safe against him until she thrashed her way through whatever was happening.

Then Indy was dry-heaving, sitting up and hunching forward, Ice holding her hair back from her face, steadying her wrenching retching body as it tried to expel its psychic poison. She gagged and spat, taking gasping breaths as the sickness finally settled enough that she sat back heavily, landing in Ice's lap, collapsing in relief against the backrest of his hard body.

Ice held her close, placing his palm flat against her clammy forehead. With his other hand he raised a bottle of water to her lips. "Small sips. There we go. Good."

Indy swallowed the cool water, closing her eyes and sighing out a breath. "Did I just have a fucking seizure?" she whispered hoarsely, panic coursing through her racked body. "That's not good, Ice. I've never had one before."

Ice was silent as he raised the bottle to her lips again. His palm stayed flat on her forehead, then slowly eased off her sweaty skin. "You aren't running a fever. Your pulse is slightly elevated but not dangerously high." He paused, waited for her to take another sip. "And you definitely didn't hit your head on anything, didn't injure the base of your spine." He took a

slow breath. “But yeah, it was some kind of seizure. We’ll get you to a hospital the moment we land. The LSD will have worn off by then. You’re going to be all right, Indy. I promise.”

She nodded, leaning against him as the cool water eased some of the muscle-spasms. She took several more sips, then nodded again when Ice’s hands unwrapped the shiny packaging of a fruit-and-nut energy bar in front of her reclining body.

“I got it,” she said, trying to reach out and take the snack-bar. But she couldn’t even raise her arms off the padded floor. She was limp like a rag-doll, drained like a dishwasher. But it was a strange sort of exhaustion, not entirely from dehydration or hunger. Still, that energy bar looked damn good. She opened wide as Ice brought it to her mouth. “Bet you didn’t expect to become a caregiver for a drooling rag-doll on this mission,” she joked half-heartedly through granola-filled bites that were strawberry-sweet and cashew-crunchy.

Ice grunted as he popped the rest of the energy snack into her hungry-hippo snapping jaws. “I’ve done plenty of caregiving. This is nothing.”

Indy swallowed the last of her snack, then leaned her head back and gazed up at the low metal ceiling. “Your parents. You and Jack cared for them at home during the end. You told me everything. I remember.”

Ice grunted again. “Was hoping you’d forgotten that part too. Wish I’d forgotten it myself.”

Indy slid down against his body, leaned her head all the way back so she could see his face. “No, you don’t,” she said softly. “You went back home to care for them even though you were still angry about the Thanksgiving incident. You didn’t forgive them, but you cared for them anyway. That’s an act of love. Unconditional love. The sort of love that couldn’t be overshadowed even by your anger.”

Ice flinched but said nothing. Indy was nestled in his lap now, the food and drink relaxing her spasming muscles but not yet easing the dull throbbing aches that Indy now realized emanated not from the muscles themselves but from specific points in her body.

The placement of those pain-points reminded her of something from years ago, when she’d taken a yoga class and made a short-lived attempt to understand the theory behind

that ancient Indian system of yogic meditation, the spiritual science of physical movement.

“Did your parents ever talk about the body’s energy centers? I think the Sanskrit word is *chakras* or something like that.” Indy looked up at Ice from her upside-down vantage point just in time to see the flinch in his eyes.

Ice shrugged with a disinterest that Indy sensed was forced. “All of their woo-woo shit sounded like Sanskrit to me. I tuned out most of it.”

“But not all of it.” Indy narrowed her eyes up at him like a curious cat. “You remember them saying something about *chakras*—I saw you flinch. What did they say?”

Ice shrugged again, then took a breath and sighed it out. “Focal points of spiritual energy. Something like that. Why?”

Indy glanced down along her almost-prone body. “I think maybe there’s something to it. I can sort of feel this throbbing pain radiating out from those exact points in my body that I’d seen on that yoga-chart. It’s like a pulsing pain, almost like it’s being broadcast from these points throughout my body.”

Ice said nothing, but Indy felt his body tighten briefly, like he’d flinched again. She turned her gaze upwards once more,

saw the hesitation in his dilated pupils, sensed the conflict in his tight lips, like Indy's questions were clearly evoking something that Ice didn't particularly want to acknowledge.

“You don't want to admit that maybe there *is* something to your hippy-dippy parents' woo-woo nonsense.” She grinned impishly up at him. “But you're thinking of something. Spit it out, Soldier.”

“Hey, I'm the interrogator in this relationship.” He gazed down at her in amusement, then looked away, sighed, and nodded. “They refused any conventional medical treatment, no chemotherapy, no prescription painkillers, none of that stuff. But they did have this therapist come over once a week to do what they called *laying of hands*. This woman would press her palms against each of these *chakras* or whatever.” He chuckled dryly. “I used to call her the witch-doctor. But it did seem to help with the pain. Told myself it was a placebo, but ...”

“But in your altered state of mind right now it feels a bit less like hokey nonsense, doesn't it?” Indy smiled up at him. “Maybe there's a reason the ancient Indian systems of *yoga* and *ayurveda* and *chakras* are still around after five thousand years.”

Ice grunted. “The reason is good marketing.”

Indy giggled, but she saw something in Ice’s eyes that wasn’t just eye-rolling sarcasm and dismissive wise-cracks. “Can we try it?”

Something flashed across Ice’s face. “Try what?”

Indy shrugged in his lap, then struggled and wriggled to sit up, somehow managing—with Ice’s help—to get into a cross-legged position, still leaning heavily against him to keep her achy body upright. “What that witch-doctor did to help your parents. Come on, you’ve read the marketing brochure. Lay your healing hands on my *chakras*, baby.”

Ice chuckled. “When that therapist showed up I’d go out for a run. Didn’t have the patience to sit through that nonsense. So I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“Begin at the top of my head.” Indy closed her eyes, kept her back as straight as possible in her cross-legged position, still using Ice’s body as an anchor. “That’s the first *chakra*. Just press your palm there. Close your eyes, try to ... try to send me good vibes, I guess.”

Ice groaned, and Indy could almost hear the epic eye-roll that was undoubtedly occurring behind her. But then she felt

him adjust his position behind her, going up on his knees, keeping his thighs pressed against her back for support, one hand on her left shoulder to steady her.

Then she felt him gently place his open palm on the crown of her head.

At first Indy felt nothing.

Then she felt something.

And suddenly she felt everything.

“Ohmygod,” she gasped, keeping her eyes closed even though it felt like her vision had somehow expanded from the vibrant energy sparked by Ice’s touch. She let the warm sparkly energy move through the cells of her throbbing head, easing the slinters of pulsing pain that she’d felt distinctly emanating from that exact point corresponding to the top *chakra* in that yoga-chart from her class. “It’s working, Ice. Keep doing that.”

“Placebo,” Ice muttered above her, but he kept his palm steadily pressed on her head.

“Placebo or witch-doctor magic, I don’t give a shit. All I know is that my headache is going and I feel better.”



Ice grunted. “Headache was from dehydration. You just drank water. Therefore the headache is gone.”

Indy sighed loudly. “Oh, wait, the headache is back again. Because now you’re sending *bad* vibes through my skull.”

“We’re on a plane flying at seven hundred miles per hour. Everything is vibrating.”

“Well, your tongue is vibrating a little too much.” Indy huffed out an exasperated breath. “Just give it a rest. What were you thinking about when you first placed your hand on my head, when it seemed to be working?”

Ice shrugged behind her. “Nothing.”

“Perfect. Think about nothing again. Just close your eyes and put your hands where I tell you, for as long as I tell you.”

Ice’s body stiffened against her back. “All right.”

“All right,” Indy said, exhaling and closing her eyes firmly, trying to ignore a strange tingling that seemed to be building from that *chakra* between her legs—which, interestingly, had been the only energy center that *hadn’t* been emanating those throbbing waves of pain.

Though maybe it was starting to emanate some other kind of throbbing waves.

Indy gasped as Ice pressed his big palm gently down on the crown of her head again, sending those ripples of relief through her skull once more, chasing the headache away from the top of her brain. The sides of her head still pulsed with pain, and so Indy figured it was time to move to the next *chakra*.

“Back of my head now,” she muttered, sensing Ice’s breathing go into a steady rhythm that felt synchronous to hers, like they were falling into sympathetic vibration, *chakra* by *chakra*. “Perfect. Oh, that feels good.”

It did feel good, and Indy almost moaned as Ice’s big palm cradled the back of her head, flooding her brain with warm waves of relief, chasing away the headache to where it had retreated from her crown to her temples.

But although the headache was gone, Indy suddenly felt a tightness in her throat. That was the next *chakra*, she realized—around where the butterfly-shaped thyroid gland sat in the throat. It had been pulsing with that strange energetic pain before, but now it was throbbing like something dense and thick had been pushed down into it from those top two *chakras*.

It's moving down through the chain, Indy thought as she tried to control the rising anxiety about what would happen if this dark energy released from those body-stored memories got more and more dense as it moved from *chakra* to *chakra*, gathering power as Ice's touch moved it through the chain of energy centers, all the way down to that last *chakra* at the point beneath her body and between her legs, around the perineum, the ultimate point of physical power, where all the creative energy of the spirit became concentrated in the flesh ...

"Throat," Indy managed to say, her voice constricted by that dark dense energy that Ice had chased away from her head but was now stuck in her throat, threatening to choke her if she let it stay there too long. "Front of my throat, Ice."

She heard his breath catch like maybe he was going to protest again, but then he relaxed and exhaled and took his hand away from the back of her head and pressed his palm against the front of her throat.

Indy gasped at the contact. It felt like fire, like his palm was burning with crackling energy. Immediately that tightness released its hold on her throat, like some dark creature

recoiling from Ice's touch, scuttling away to its next hiding place along the energetic chain.

The heart.

Now Indy cried out, her body lurching forward as her heart suddenly skipped a beat and then began hammering with erratic urgency, racking her ribcage, shaking her skeleton. She thought she might be having another seizure, could feel Ice quickly pull his hand off her throat to hold her still again.

Then she realized it wasn't a seizure.

It was a fucking heart attack.

"No!" Indy lurched forward again, shaking off Ice's arms which were trying to wrap her up. Her eyes were still closed tight, her hammering heart convulsing her body as it screamed out its message that came not in words but sensations of desperate yearning for his hot touch on her skin, his heavy palm on her chest, his dominant masculine energy which she so fucking needed right now, needed to join with her feminine so together they could hunt down this dreadful packet of pulsing dark energy that was moving through her body like a living breathing frightful creature with its own consciousness.

And now Indy's own consciousness was being pulled so far into her own body that she could *see* her heart within her chest, see its beautiful dark muscle straining with each pulsing painful beat, hear its yearning for his steadying touch, its need for his burning palm pressing against her bare skin, his dominant power chasing that creature away from her precious heart, sending it scurrying farther down, closer to where it could be forced out of her, ejected from her, expelled, expunged, eradicated, fucking *exterminated!*

“Indy, what—” came his voice through her splintering consciousness as Indy flailed and thrashed and now pulled off her top and yanked off her bra and somehow grabbed his arm and dragged it to her chest until he relented and let her do it, let her guide his open palm to where it was needed, where it belonged. “Oh, hell, Indy.”

A shuddering sigh escaped Indy's trembling lips as Ice's scorching hot palm pressed down against her chest, just above her bare breasts, flat against her sternum, his long fingers splayed wide, one of them lengthwise down her cleavage, the core of his palm directly above her heart.

Her heart which had suddenly snapped back into steady rhythm, still hammering hard but not with that erratic urgency

which Indy somehow knew would have killed her if not for this, if not for him.

And she knew Ice felt it too. He was silent and rigid behind her, his body pulsing from his own racing heart. There was no protest now, no eye-rolling sarcasm, no dismissive grunts, no chuckles, no snorts, no disbelief, no doubt.

No doubt at all.

They were playing this game for her fucking life here.

It sounded crazy, but Indy had seen it in that searingly vivid vision of her heart straining with every beat. Already she could feel that densely packed living creature of dark emotion that Ice had forced out of her heart just in time move down to its next hiding place, the next energy center, the *chakra* nestled in that ganglion of nerves called the solar plexus.

And as she thought it Indy felt her upper abdomen seize up, her solar plexus tightening so hard she almost passed out. But Ice seemed to understand it even if he didn't want to acknowledge it, maybe even didn't want to believe it. His big palm moved quickly down the front of her body, sliding down along her bare breasts, passing over her pert nipples which were erect and hard, coming to rest directly over her solar plexus, pressing down with a firmness that made Indy think he

was starting to believe, starting to accept, starting to acknowledge.

Starting to control.

“Oh, fuck, Ice,” she groaned as Ice pulled her against his body, sitting back on his legs so she was half-reclining against him, her bare breasts gleaming gold in the sparkling yellow light of their little cave in the clouds, her nipples almost black from the hot blood pushing them up into sharply pebbled peaks. “Lower now. My belly-button. That’s where it is now.”

Ice’s breath was heavy against the top of her head as he slid his palm down along her bare torso, along her smooth dark skin, holding her firmly against his rock-hard body. He pressed down with his moving palm, massaging her sweat-silked skin along the way, the base of his palm pushing that ball of dense psychic energy lower, farther, closer ...

“Closer,” Indy gasped, and now in her LSD-laced mind’s eye she saw all that old emotion personified as some dark tentacled ugly creature, its primordial consciousness alive with angry viciousness, like it understood what was happening, saw that it was getting to the end of the line, that it was about to be forced out of her body, that it would have to make its last stand, fight to the death to keep its dark tentacles still attached

to where it had lived for thirty years. “Please, Ice, closer, it’s all the way there now, I can feel it hiding all the way down, like it’s digging its claws in, oh, fuck, Ice, get it out, please, get it out of me.”

Ice’s fingertips were just past the edge of her waistband, but he didn’t push them farther down, kept them there as that dark packet of psychic poison escaped his clutches, scuttled off to where Indy could feel it preparing to make its final stand in that dark space at the lower apex of her delta.

The point of ultimate physical power.

The seat of the body’s creative energy.

The goddess-center where new life formed.

Now Indy was almost out of her mind. Her fingers feverishly unbuttoned and unzipped, pushed her pants and underwear down past her hips, grabbed Ice’s wrist and tried to pull it lower, closer, so she could use his power to do what her body screamed to have done.

But Ice resisted, his bulging triceps tightening against her torso, his strength no match for hers. “Indy, listen,” he whispered urgently. “We’re still on a drug that makes us see



things that aren't real, feel things that aren't real, do things that  
—”

Ice didn't finish the sentence. Or maybe she just couldn't hear through the thunder in her temples. Indy's body was arched back over his, and through her splintered psychedelic vision she saw his hungry gaze moving down along her exposed body, taking in her glistening globes, her peaked points, her smooth belly, her dark triangle, her shining slit.

“Oh, fuck, Indy,” he groaned from above her as Indy relaxed her grip on his wrist, gave up trying to pull Ice's hand any farther.

Because she knew she didn't need to.

She saw it.

She felt it.

She loved it.

Now Ice let out a guttural groan, an animalistic expression that Indy understood was Ice's body winning the battle against his brain, overruling that voice in his head which had been desperately trying to explain what couldn't be articulated, couldn't be acknowledged, couldn't be understood by abstract thought.

Because it was the domain of physical touch.

The realm of the animal.

The battleground of the flesh.

And then Ice's hand slid down past her lower abdomen, fingers pushing through her thick dark curls, thumb grinding against her clit as those fingertips traced their way along her dripping slit, all the way down beneath her wet underside, coming to rest with his palm flat against her mound, thick middle finger snaked along her perineal pathway, stretching all the way to the edge of her dark rear hole, claiming all that holy feminine ground with his masculine touch.

Indy exhaled with a shuddering moan, her body quivering in Ice's arms as he pressed his palm hard against her mound, his fingers tight against that sensitive stretch of secret space. Her eyelids fluttered and she moved against his body, groaning out a sigh, arching her back as Ice began to rub her pussy, keeping his palm firm against her front, fingers buried in her bush, thumb grinding the hood of her clit down against that stiff sensitive nub that screamed for release.

His fingers teased her slit open now, and Indy gasped as Ice's middle finger entered her vagina, careful and slow but with confident firmness, like Ice was perhaps in that same

state of madness where they both understood the stakes of this drug-heightened game, stakes that almost certainly would seem unreal in sobriety but were serious as death here in Wonderland, ultra-vivid in this fluid reality which was so far down the rabbithole there was no way back, only forward, deeper, farther, darker, closer ...

“I’m so close,” she muttered through trembling lips, her eyelids fluttering like a butterfly in its death throes. “Oh, Ice, I’m so fucking close.”

But it was the sort of closeness that kept creeping back as you approached, leaving you reaching for an infinity that was always just beyond your grasp. She writhed as her body reached for that evasive orgasm, Ice’s finger all the way inside her now, curling inside her like a claw, hunting that creature hiding inside her consciousness, trapped in her terminal point.

Oh, she was so close, so *fucking* close, teetering on the edge of an infinite orgasm that she somehow knew would expel that dark energy, would banish that beastly burden she’d carried unwittingly for thirty years. It was complete and absolute nonsense but it was the only thing that made any sense in that deranged moment as Indy tried desperately to fall over that edge but couldn’t, was stuck in erotic purgatory,

dangling over the abyss of absolution, swinging over the sea of salvation, trying to climb an endless ladder that never got to heaven, descending to where she was tantalizingly close to the heat of hell but not close enough to set her ablaze the way she needed right now, needed like not just a drug but a medicine, like this was a serious emergency, playing for all the damn marbles, life or death in a way that felt frighteningly real, breathtakingly vivid, sickeningly serious.

But the climax didn't come, and now Indy's eyelids flicked open and her body jerked and she screamed when she felt that darkness start to regain lost ground, begin to climb back up along her energetic chain, like it was retracing its steps, starting a dreadful ascent back up the ladder of *chakras*, its tentacles reaching up and locking around that psychic point behind her belly-button, trying to reclaim precious territory in the battleground of her body.

Indy looked up in panicked despair, her pleading gaze searching for Ice's eyes. She found them, two burning slits glowing green in the psychedelic light, like his drug-enhanced consciousness saw what was happening, understood what needed to happen now, recognized that she needed him to

finish this fight, to win this battle, to bring out the woman in her the way only a man could.

The way only *her* man could.

And now suddenly Indy understood why every time they'd come close to the ultimate act something had stopped them, some event that bottled up that sexual energy, pushed it back inside their psychic shells so it could build to the boil, gain density and power, prime itself to push past the final frontier.

It was completely apeshit ridiculous but Indy couldn't shake off the overwhelming sense of vivid certainty that *this* was the ultimate reality, the truth behind the veil, the secret behind the curtain, the magic behind the mystery.

And suddenly Ice was kissing her, furious and fierce, those last strands of sanity torn off and tossed away, the animal inside him roaring to the forefront, his own beast leaping at the throat of the beast within her, staking his claim, shaking its mane, taking over the game.

“Oh, hell, Ice, I love you,” she managed to gurgle when he broke the kiss long enough to let her breathe before devouring her lips again, driving his tongue down her throat, grasping her breasts in his savage hands, kneading her globes until she groaned, pinching her nipples until she shrieked.

Ice growled something that wasn't a word in any known human language. Indy replied without even attempting to form a sentence. It was just a pure physical sonic response, some kind of sound that emerged from her throat as pure vibration.

And now everything vibrated as Ice sat up and turned her body and set Indy flat on her back against the padded floor. She could feel the plane's thundering engines rumble her body as she stretched her arms out wide and arched her back and gasped when she looked down and saw Ice rolling her panties off her legs, his face contorted with dangerous desire, eyes shining like a wolf's on a blood-moon night.

"Oh, Ice," she groaned as he held her legs up and apart, buried his face in her crotch, driving his tongue into her pussy, now hands sliding beneath her ass and raising her bottom in the air while he tongue-fucked her to a frenzy, licked and lapped, kneading her buttocks with savage strength, spreading her asscrack and running his fingers along her dark rear line as his lips rumbled over her clit. "Oh, *fuck*, Ice! I need more. I need all of you, Ice."

"I know what you need," Ice growled as he pulled his tongue out of her pussy and raised his wolf-wild gaze from between her obscenely spread thighs. He rubbed her pussy

roughly with the back of his hand, licked her sweetness off his knuckles, then suddenly grabbed her hips and flipped her over, raised her ass, smacked her buttocks hard and quick three times, *smack smack smack*, before reaching one hand between her slick inner thighs and spreading her slit with his fingers from behind and below. “I know what you fucking need, Indy.”

Indy was completely out of her mind now. Her asscheeks stung from his slaps, her pussy dripped from his tongue, the sensation of her slit being spread by his fingers taking her close to the edge again but not far enough, not deep enough, not hard enough, oh please now, she needed it now, right fucking now, Ice.

Her face was buried in the padded drop-cloth, her ass raised so high she could see back between her legs. She watched in an erotic haze as Ice unbuckled and unzipped with one hand while keeping her pussy spread with his other hand. She could feel his primal gaze focused on her glistening slit, and it only made her wetter, only made her hotter.

And now Ice had somehow gotten his pants down enough for his cock to spring out behind her. Looking down past her hanging breasts, through the space between her spread-out

thighs Indy was shocked to see how thick he was, how massively erect he was, his shaft gleaming with pre-cum that had dripped from his swollen cockhead, coating every part of his erection all the way down to his heavy balls.

She watched in a trembling trance as Ice's big hand fistfisted his enormous cock, guiding it to where he'd been holding her slit wide open.

She groaned as his cockhead made first contact with her dark nether lips.

Gasped when Ice dragged his heavy club up and down her slit, slicking her up with their combined wetness.

Gaped when Ice pressed that massive battering ram of a cock against her entrance and began to push himself into her.

Time seemed to slow down even as space expanded to infinity as Indy's vagina was forced open so wide she almost passed out. Her body tightened and her heart hopped when Ice's bulbous bulkhead breached her border, driving dangerously deep as it spread her inner walls, its hungry cyclops eye hunting its prey like a dragon in the night.

Indy saw it all in the swirling madness of her inner vision, felt it in every cell of her raging hot body, smelled it in the



heavy musk of their chamber in the clouds, the potent aromas of human sex mixing with the warm scent of animal fur.

And then Indy heard the howls around them, and she sensed their animal audience awakened by the electric energy, alert with surreal recognition, pawing with primal participation. The plane's engines roared beneath them, a booming background thunder that harmonized with the howling, and now Indy thought she heard herself wailing as her vagina stretched and filled and sighed and screamed, and Ice was shouting as he thrust inside her, and everything was happening together, merging into one point of infinite density, sight and sound, scent and touch, all of it somehow in synch, all of them psychedelic players in a cosmic orchestra on a surreal stage with screeching violins, screaming sitars, thundering drumbeats, clanging cymbals, back and forth, up and down, in and out and in again, deep again, so deep, so fucking deep.

Ice was so deep inside her that he was lost. Vision had long since been replaced by swirls and spirals, colors and textures. The sounds filling the air were not of this earth, and it was only when Ice heard himself snort like a bull that he was suddenly aware of wolves howling around them and then remembered where they were and saw glimpses of those caged animals hurling themselves at their bars, going wild like they had been pulled into the madness of whatever was happening here, like they understood what was being unleashed here, undone here, unwound, unbound, unlocked, unboxed.

He couldn't reconcile any of it, sure as hell couldn't explain it, would *never* be able to explain it once they got back to the straight world of sanity and sobriety, of daylight and discipline.

But he'd felt it in her. Sensed that dark dense thing of violent traumatic energy inside her body like it was a physical creature, alive with its own subterranean life, aware with its own primitive consciousness. Ice knew damn well he was on a psychotropic drug that temporarily rewired the brain, scrambled its signals, made you see meaning in madness,

reason in randomness, ghosts in the shadows, demons in the darkness.

But damn, it felt like he really was hunting Indy's demons, chasing them down with each thrust of his powerful hips, fighting them with each heavy slam of his pelvis against her cushion. His eyes were closed so tight he could see inside his own fucking skull, watch his own brain break down as it tried hopelessly to find its way back to some vague memory of the man Ice had once been, a man that Ice would never be again.

Because now Ice was *her* man.

"I love you, Indy," came the thought that may or may not have emerged as sound. Even if it did escape his lips Ice couldn't be sure if it was in words or just these animalistic expressions being served up by his raging body, snorts and snarls, grunts and growls, howls and hollers as they moved together like oiled snakes trying to eat each other, glistening sea creatures in a feeding frenzy, stirring the dark waters into a frothy chum, gulping and gasping, diving and dipping, thrusting and toiling, raging and roiling.

Ice pushed back into her, his eyelids flicking open just long enough to catch a glimpse of Indy's gleaming back spread out before him, her arms splayed out wide to support

herself, head tucked in like she was looking beneath herself, past her pulsing breasts, staring as Ice's piston of a cock pumped into her from behind, his heavy balls slapping against her wet undersides, preparing to discharge what had been building all day, ever since that anticlimactic showdown in the steam.

It was almost like earlier they'd been pulled back from finishing what they'd started, as if some cryptic force was operating behind the scenes, an invisible hand bottling up that sexual energy like it was a weapon that would be needed later, needed now.

For a moment Ice thought of those Darkwater guys waxing poetic at Hogan's bachelor party. Fate and destiny, they were going on about like drunk sailors—which of course they were, Navy men, all of them. Lost at sea, Ice had figured at the time. SEALs who'd gotten sentimental now that they'd settled down.

Spend enough time floating on an endless ocean staring up at the stars and pretty soon you see patterns in the randomness, Ice had thought. Hell, he'd never been able to see those shapes in the constellations, those patterns in the chaotic night sky.

But right now, in the midst of absolute fucking chaos, everything made so much sense it terrified him. The patterns of this insane mission suddenly connected to form pathways that seemed to be leading them to something climactic.

Ice's own climax was approaching now, his fingers digging deep into Indy's cushioned sides as he pumped and thrust. She was yelping with each inbound stroke, pushing her ass back into his hips to meet his violent drives like she was trying desperately to match his strength. Each back-and-forth pass through her slick passage sent shivers of sublime ecstasy through Ice's flexed body. Every cell in every muscle seemed to be participating in the act, and in his drug-frenzied clarity Ice suddenly saw how sexual energy truly was the fundamental force of physics, that everything was vibrating waves of pulsing energy, thrusting and thrashing, bumping into each other and spinning away only to be pulled back together and dragged away again, in and out, together and apart, left and right, day and night, fight and flight, spirit and flesh, heaven and hell, man and woman ...

And Ice was lost again in his woman, his own name spinning away into the ether along with his identity. He was nothing but pure masculine energy now, relentlessly reaching

for the only thing that could complete him, the other side of the foundational energy that gave the universe its spin, gave the day its night, gave the darkness its light.

Around them the lazy dogs had morphed into rabid wolves, the cages transformed into dark woods, the silent baggage moving like creatures of the forest skulking through the shadowy trees. Ice watched his thick tree-trunk of a shaft exit halfway and then drive back into her, its dark glistening shape disappearing beneath her quivering rear globes, their motion taking them closer to a climax that Ice could swear meant more than sex, involved more than flesh, was an act that would seal their fate, a joining that would heal her hate.

Suddenly Ice saw it like a vivid vision, saw Indy's bottled-up hatred which was primitive and primal, the unspeakable anger of that abandoned infant, the confused rage of that betrayed baby, the dark despair of that forsaken fledgling. He saw it like it was a real creature of density and weight, a creature that had been fighting for its life but was now fading with every forward thrust, retreating as their release drew near, about to be overcome not by the violence of their coupling but by the force of their love.

A love that united those twin halves of sex and violence into one unsplittable atom of invincible energy, love so powerful that it gained its own physical form, became a creature in its own reason and right, a beast with its own power and might, the only way they could win this fight, the only weapon that could make hate take flight.

Love.

Ice exploded.

He exploded into light.

Exploded into heat.

Exploded into her.

Indy felt him explode into her, above her, within her. She'd been hunched over like a dominated animal, clawing at the carpeted floor, her teeth gritted as she braced for each inward thrust, moving back to receive his entry like she wanted to take him deeper, own him like he owned her, consume him like he was consuming her.

She'd been staring back along the underside of her body, watching through her hanging breasts, past her spread-out thighs, her splintered vision centering on the breathtaking sight of Ice's pillar of a cock entering and exiting, thrusting and turning, driving in and drawing back, the rhythm putting her into a trance so deep she forgot who she was, forgot *what* she was, animal or air, spirit or starlight, woman or wormhole, a doorway to another dimension, a gateway to another galaxy, an entryway to insanity, an exit to eternity.

And suddenly Indy was spinning through that wormhole, shooting past that doorway, flying past that gateway, tumbling through that entryway, hurtling through the exit to a climax that had been eternally out of reach and was now upon her, Ice's explosion triggering her own destruction, their violent



union sending splinters of multi-dimensional light through her mixed-up senses that were all vision and all sound and all touch and all taste, all at once, all together, just like they were together now, just like they were one now, one animal, one spirit, one body, one soul, one emotion ...

One love.

And as Indy came she saw it, saw their love suddenly take physical form, a blinding gleaming shining smiling creature of sobbing screaming howling clapping joy, boundless and boisterous, unlimited and unstoppable, rolling around like an exuberant infant, expanding as it giggled in cosmic ecstasy, its light and heat burning beautiful and bright to a white hot supernova of positivity that filled every space in her glowing body, leaving no space for hate to hide, no room for rage to remain, no quarter for fear to fester, no corner of her light-filled soul for that dreadful darkness to hook its broken claws and cling on.

Indy clung to the floor as her mind splintered into a thousand pieces that instantly fitted back together to form a breathtaking vision of Ice's body fitted tight against hers from behind, emptying himself into her as the airplane hurtled

through space, as the animals howled in instinctive delight, as the luggage rattled and rolled in rhythm.

“Ice, I’m ... I can’t even ... oh, hell, Ice ... oh, oh, *oh!*”

Her eyelids flicked open and her eyes rolled up in her head as the climax thundered all the way in just as Ice shouted out his monstrous release, his hands reaching below and grasping her breasts, pinching her nipples, his cock flexing and spurting inside her, balls tightening and releasing against her behind, again and again like they were forcing out all his masculine essence, pouring his starlight into her until she shone like the sun, glowed like the moon, glimmered like the galaxies.

They came together through space and time, the plane hitting turbulence that Indy knew came from inside its shimmering shell, came from this cosmic climax that had changed the rotation of the earth, the trajectory of the moon, the paths of the planets.

Then suddenly peace.

It entered as fast as the darkness exited. For a poignant moment Indy stiffened like she’d been shocked, felt Ice locked in against her body from behind with the same startling stillness. Then with a heavy groan he collapsed on her, his

weight slowly pressing her down into the soft padded earth, his cock still deep inside her as their bodies relaxed together.

Indy's face was turned to the side, her lips moving soundlessly. Ice buried his face in her hair, his arms spread wide over her outstretched arms, their fingers entwined like forest vines.

The feral wolves surrounding them slowly turned back into domesticated dogs, panting in bewilderment before settling down until Indy wasn't sure if they'd ever been on their feet and howling. Her vision still swirled with those drug-induced patterns, but the frenzied wired energy had settled into something smooth and silky.

They lay in awed silence for what felt like hours, days, years. Then Ice kissed her gently on the cheek from above, slowly rolled his body off hers, pulled her into him until she was snuggled against his big chest, nestled into the warm nooks of his protective body.

“How's that headache now?” he whispered with a wicked grin, planting a wet slobbery open-mouthed kiss that covered her nose and lips and even her chin.

Indy scrunched up her face, rubbed her nose against his chest to get his wetness off it, then glared up into his sly green

eyes. “It’s gone, but only because I seem to have misplaced my head. My brain, I mean.” She blinked, curling tighter into Ice as he pulled her closer, kissed her gently on the forehead. “Ice, I ... I don’t even know how to process what just happened. It felt like ... inside me, I mean ... like there was something physical, solid, like ... oh, hell, I don’t know how to even ...”

Ice nodded against her. “I don’t either. But I felt it too, Indy. I actually saw it in my mind. I know it’s just the hallucinatory effect of the drug, but ...”

He trailed off. Indy glanced up at him. “But what?”

Ice sighed, shook his head, relaxed resignation softening his eyes. “But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t real. The human brain is a filter most of the time. It blocks certain wavelengths of light, ignores certain ranges of sound. It’s possible that it also blocks certain other types of perception during normal consciousness. Senses that get opened up while on a drug like this. It’s still drug-induced, but maybe it’s also real. Kind of real. A little bit real. Maybe. Possibly.”

Indy raised an eyebrow, cocked her head. “Wait, who are you, and what have you done with Ice Wagner?”

Ice chuckled, sliding his hand down past the curve of her hip and smacking her gently on her bare butt. He squeezed her buttcheek hard, smacked it once more, then took his hand away to look at his watch.

“Wait,” he muttered. “That can’t be right.”

Indy frowned at his raised eyebrows. “What?”

“We’ve been airborne for six hours already.”

Indy stared, then shook her head. “We must have blacked out for a few hours after ... after *that*.”

“Or during,” Ice whispered before shaking his head and shrugging. He took a breath, a sudden flash of concern coming over him. “Headache jokes aside, are you feeling all right, Indy?”

She nodded against his body. “Of course. You know I am. You can feel that I’m all right, can’t you?”

Ice nodded, but the concern lingered in his gaze. “You had a seizure earlier, Indy. We need to be very careful. Jamaica-Queens Medical Center isn’t far from JFK. That’s our first stop. Maybe our *only* stop.”

Indy frowned, then shook her head firmly. “We need to be at that meeting tonight. You said it yourself. And I understand

why. I can't *explain* why, but I understand it. There's something very real about emotional energy, Ice. About how it's built up, how it's released, *when* it's released." She shook her head again. "If Rhett Rodgers really is ... really is my father, this might be the only chance we get to ... to ambush him, using emotion as a weapon." She raised her head, eyes riveted, head buzzing. "Maybe that's what Benson is trying to engineer with that meeting. Provoke Rhett into showing his hand, making a mistake, doing something that gives them an excuse to ..."

Ice's eyes narrowed. "They might need an excuse to put him down, but I don't. Not anymore. Not after seeing what he triggered in you, Indy. There's no place on earth Rhett Rodgers can hide where I won't get to him. But you're my priority, and you'll always be my priority. So it's hospital first, Indy. Brain MRI to make sure everything is all right."

"You can't *force* me to undergo a medical procedure," she complained. "That's called oppression."

Ice oppressed her ass with a tight smack. "Yeah, so what?"

Indy sighed exaggeratedly, nuzzled deeper into Ice's armpit, which smelled like him, warm and fuzzy, powerful and

protective, maybe a bit oppressive, now that she thought about it.

She wrinkled her nose and looked up. “We’ve got nine more hours of flight-time. The drug will have worn off by then. We’ll be rested and refreshed. You know just as well as I do what caused that ... that *episode*. It wasn’t a seizure—or if it was, I’m all right now. You know damn well that I’m all right now.” She sighed again when Ice’s eyes went cold with determination, like he’d flipped that switch again, made his decision and didn’t give a damn about what she wanted. “You know what? This isn’t about me. It isn’t about my brain. It’s about you. It’s about you and your ... your *dick*.”

Ice frowned. “What the hell does—”

Indy cut him off. “You’re being overprotective, like you’ve suddenly decided that I’m a delicate damaged creature who needs to be treated like glass, like I could shatter at any moment.”

Ice snorted out a breath. “Well, excuse me for giving a shit.”

“You want to go after Rhet Rodgers on your own, don’t you? Without worrying about having me by your side freaking

the geek out, having seizures and convulsions, going hysterical or something like that.”

Ice closed his eyes, exhaled hard. “Indy, you’re vulnerable around him. Hell, his photograph triggered something intense enough that I was scared for your sanity—maybe even your damn life! We can’t be sure how you’ll react in his physical presence. It’s just not safe for you. I won’t allow it, and that’s final.”

A spark of hot anger burned through Indy. “So now I need your permission to do things? Don’t remember us talking about a master-servant relationship.”

Ice’s gaze flashed green with his own spark. “Don’t remember us talking about *any* kind of relationship,” he muttered.

Indy stared, blinked, swallowed.

Then she lowered her gaze and said nothing, raising her head off his chest, struggling to sit up, reaching for her clothes as she suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable, like maybe she was that porcelain doll, brittle and broken, delicate and damaged, not yet whole, not yet healed.

Not yet his.



“Shit, I didn’t mean that,” came Ice’s voice through her suddenly aching head. “Indy, listen, hey, I love you, I fucking love you! That didn’t come out right. I’m just so used to being alone, so used to winning every argument that I blurted out something I didn’t mean. We’re together. Of course we’re fucking together. Come here. Where are you going?”

He tried to grab her but Indy shook off his hands, her own hands shaking so hard it took several attempts to get her bra back on. Finally she snapped the clasp tight, wriggled back into her top, squirmed back into her pants, then crawled across the vibrating floor towards one of the dog-cages. She gazed through the bars, smiling at the soft brown eyes of the Labrador-Collie mix she’d seen earlier.

The cages were latched but not locked, and without thinking Indy slid the bolt open and pulled open the door.

“Hey, puppy,” she whispered as the dog raised its head, pricked up its ears, stretched its front paws, wagging its tail as Indy reached in and carefully petted its head, ruffled the soft fur behind its ears. “*You* love me, don’t you?”

“I love you too,” came Ice’s growly voice from behind her, his warm fuzzy body enveloping her from behind, his big arms wrapping around her, fingers joining hers until they were both

petting the blissfully beaming dog. “Indy, listen, we are together now, and we’re going to be together forever. But ...”

He trailed off, but Indy’s mind finished the thought—not in words but emotion. She let the emotion ripple through her as she gazed into the dog’s languid eyes, buried her fingers in its soft fur as Ice held her from behind.

It took some time for the emotion to work itself through to words, took even more time for the words to form a coherent sentence.

“But we aren’t there yet, are we?” Indy felt Ice’s fingers lock between hers, pulling her hands away from the dog’s fur. She sighed, watched him gently shut the dog’s cage and safely slide the latch back across. Then she relaxed back into him, sighed again. “Just knowing that we love each other isn’t enough to get us to the ending we want. It might be for every other normal couple in the world, but not us. We need to finish this before we can truly be together in a way that brings us peace. And finishing it isn’t going to be peaceful.” She turned to look at him now, a tremor going through her body when she saw the glint in his eyes. “It’s going to be violent. It’s going to be dangerous. It’s going to be risky. That’s why you want to push me away. That’s why you snapped at me, flipped that

switch to shut me out. You want to finish this alone, without risking my life. You know there's no guarantee we walk away from that meeting alive. But you also know we *both* have to go, that our happy ending is on the other side of that fight, that there's no short-cut to our forever, no way around this, no path except through it."

Ice said nothing, his eyes burning with what Indy knew was not just worry and concern but also understanding and admiration, recognition and resolve, danger and determination.

Indy watched those eyes, a shudder going through her when she saw that edgy darkness flicker behind Ice's pupils, understood that they were so far from a normal couple it was scary.

And what he said next confirmed it.

Confirmed that normal was nowhere in sight.

Darkness their only path to the light.

"All right," Ice said, taking a slow breath, shaking his head, shrugging lazily, then kissing her gently on the lips. "First we kill your asshole father. *Then* we get your head examined."

“I should have my head examined for agreeing to go along with this.” Kaiser glanced over from the front passenger seat towards Benson, who was coolly steering the boat-sized Ford Crown Victoria around Dupont Circle on route to their showdown in Georgetown. “You do realize this is complete insanity, right, John?”

“There’s a fine line between madness and genius.” Benson flicked his gaze at the rearview mirror to where he could see Jack Wagner sitting alert and upright in the back seat. “What do you think, Jack? You regretting getting on board the Darkwater crazy train yet?”

Jack shot a glance at the mirror, his eyes narrowed with focus. “No, sir.”

Benson paused a beat. “How about your brother? Think he’s regretting it yet?”

Jack’s gaze sharpened to where Benson thought it might shatter the mirror. But Jack said nothing, just stared a hole into Benson’s reflection before turning away and gazing out the window.

“You heard from him?” Benson asked quietly, already knowing the answer from Jack’s silence. Yeah, Jack had heard from Ice. If not, Benson would already be a dead man. Jack had been dangerously pissed off about how Benson had knowingly let a CIA NOC assassin go after Ice without sending in backup. Sure, Benson had told Jack about the State Department alert confirming Scarlet was dead—which meant Ice was probably alive. But there’d been no reaction from Jack, like maybe he already knew Ice was alive. “Figure you two brothers have burner phones that even I don’t know about.”

Jack ignored the question, instead responding to Benson’s earlier quip. “Ice joined Darkwater because of me, not you. If he gets killed on this mission it’s on me, not you.”

“Really? Because I got the distinct impression that you were damn close to slitting my throat when you found out I’d cut Ice loose with an assassin on his tail.” Benson took a left turn, then a right, slowed down as they approached the brownstone-lined streets of Georgetown.

Jack grunted, flashed a wicked look at Benson’s eyes. “Delta guys don’t slit throats, Benson. We’re trained to slide the knife into the lower back, right into the kidney. Throat-

slitting only happens in Hollywood. It's messy, noisy, and unreliable. You're more likely to get your fingers bitten off than make a clean cut."

Benson chuckled. "You hear that, Martin? Kid says we aren't in a Hollywood movie, so make sure you don't try any heroics." Benson shifted in his seat, the bulletproof vest beneath his shirt a bit too tight for his liking. Still, it was a necessary precaution, and he'd insisted that all three of them vest up. He glanced at Kaiser, who was gazing out the window at the silent brownstone homes glowing in the soft yellow light of elegant wrought-iron streetlamps. "But seriously, Martin. You stay behind Jack at all times. You're just window dressing."

"Thought I was bait." Kaiser cracked a half-grin, then sighed and nodded. "All right, but this is going to be a nonevent. Rhett's not stupid enough to try anything. He knows that even if Paige flipped on him, it's still just her word against his. The guy lives and breathes plausible deniability, just like we do. He's going to play it cool, pretend like he knows nothing about anything, like this really is just a mundane security walkthrough." He chuckled darkly. "Hell, we're about as likely to get provoked as he is. Make sure *we* don't lose our

cool and give Rhett a reason to defend himself and take us out. Wouldn't *that* be a twist worthy of your games, John."

Benson smiled tightly. "We'll get to him. There's still the video from thirty years ago." Benson noted Jack's head move, a quizzical frown breaking on the former Delta's clean-shaved face. But Jack stayed silent. Benson continued. "I'll hint that maybe it gets leaked to Robinson, perhaps even the *Times* and the *Post*. Might not put him in prison, but would certainly kill his chances to be the next Director."

Kaiser snorted. "He'll call that bluff. Rhett's sharp enough to know I would never allow you to leak that video. It would be an invitation to the FBI to stick their nose into Company business. And nobody wants that. Hell, Robinson might get me fired just for leaking it. And in the end it probably wouldn't hold up in court against Rhett anyway—especially since there's no body."

Benson chuckled darkly. "Well, there is a body. Just not a dead one."

Jack cut in now. "Anything I need to know here, Benson? Secret video evidence? Bodies that aren't dead? Fill me in anytime."

Benson grinned. “Nah, nothing you need to worry about. You keep your secrets and I’ll keep mine.”

Jack flinched, but said nothing. Benson was impressed. The guy was a good soldier who respected the chain of command. But he was an even better brother. His loyalty to Ice came first. Benson was a distant second.

Good to know. He was right to bring Jack along.

Question was, who was Jack bringing along?

Benson was tempted to ask. Jack was obviously in touch with Ice, but Benson didn’t know much more than that. His CIA tech-guy had been watching the flight manifests coming out of Mumbai, monitoring all communications with the U.S. Embassy, tapping into Edwin Moses’s phones just in case Ice and Indy reached out to him for help. But nothing had popped up, which made Benson wonder whether Ice and Indy were just laying low until the Scarlet thing blew over or if they were flying high, somehow on their way back to the States.

Again Benson thought to ask Jack point blank. But he held off. Benson understood that Jack and Ice were probably suspicious of his motives.

And they were right to be suspicious.



Because the dark truth was that this game had gotten far bigger than just Ice and Indy. Benson couldn't be certain how it would play out. Couldn't be sure if Indy and Ice were fated to be at the center of this game or destined to be collateral damage.

After all, Benson's beloved Sally had been collateral damage once.

Fate didn't play favorites.

Destiny didn't give a damn.

So Benson kept his trap shut, told himself not to try and force fate's hand, not to make the mistake of thinking he could direct destiny. He couldn't let his own emotions lead him astray. Yeah, he'd actively recruited Ice into Darkwater. He'd personally brought Indy into the CIA. If they got killed on this mission it would absolutely weigh heavy on Benson's conscience.

But that conscience was already carrying the load from years of cold choices, decades of dark decisions. Sure, losing Ice and Indy might be the straw that broke him, but what the hell else could Benson do? Every damn player had to make their own choices. If Ice and Indy had decided to hide out, then shit, that was their choice. They'd have to live with it, and

so would Benson. He had to let it play out, let the emotional energy build. Forcing the issue might pop that balloon before it was big enough.

Now Benson noticed Jack glance at his watch. It was a casual gesture, but something in the way Jack's face tightened stood out, like the kid wasn't just thinking about the meeting schedule but about some other time-table.

A tingle moved up Benson's spine as he turned onto the Senator's quiet street, slowing the car to a crawl. His lips tightened to a thin smile as that tingle spread through his upper back, warming him with that familiar sensation which told him events were shifting in the ether, players lining up in their positions, actors taking their spots on the stage as the universe prepared to raise the cosmic curtain on another act in its infinite game of life and death.

The Senator's brownstone was silent as death as Benson glided to a stop near the open parking space blocked off by traffic cones. He kept the engine running as Jack got out, swept the surroundings with a practiced gaze, then grabbed the traffic cones by their spindly necks and dragged them out of the way.

Benson parked the Crown Vic, turned off the engine, then glanced at Kaiser, who'd snapped off his seatbelt and was adjusting his bulletproof vest impatiently.

"This is going to be a nonevent," Kaiser muttered again, pushing open the door and stepping out, his tall lean frame slightly stooped from a decade of sitting behind a desk—the most powerful desk in Virginia, perhaps in the entire United States, but still a damn desk. "We don't have enough to force Rhett's hand, and he damn well knows it."

"Have a little faith, Martin." Benson got out, closed the door gently, one hand resting on the handle of the Smith and Wesson 9mm holstered on his belt behind his open jacket. "Rhett's seen the alert from State with that photo of Scarlet. That had to have rattled him, maybe enough to really want a shot at me. Besides, Rhett still doesn't know for sure what Paige told us, and he's got enough respect for us to know there'd be no meeting if we didn't have something up our sleeve."

Kaiser frowned at him across the dark gray hood of Benson's car. "*Do* we have something up our sleeves, John?"

Benson shrugged as he walked around the front of the car, glancing around the quiet block. The Senator's home was on a

double-plot, which gave it a little space on either side. The next-door homes both had lights on upstairs, but the windows were closed and the drapes were drawn. It was about as quiet as it could get in a city like Washington, DC.

“Maybe it will be a nonevent,” Benson said, completing his own well-practiced visual sweep of the area. He might not be a Delta-trained hunter like Jack, but Benson had a good feel for whether he was about to be attacked. “Street is clear. Which I suspected it would be, of course. Even if Rhett is tempted to hit us, he’s not going to risk bringing anyone else in. No CIA asset is going to take out the Agency Director on U.S. soil.”

Jack grunted, his eyes alert like a wolf’s on a moonless night. “There’s no shortage of freelance killers-for-hire in DC. Please stay behind me at all times, Director Kaiser.”

Kaiser exhaled heavily, then shrugged and let Jack step in front of him as they approached the darkened brownstone. As they got close Kaiser pulled out one of the keycards which Robinson had entrusted him with while the house was empty, just in case the CIA security team needed to check out something. The card temporarily disabled the security system, including the cameras. Robinson didn’t know about this little

meeting, and Benson half-hoped he would never need to know, that perhaps it was best if the most likely situation played out and it was indeed a nonevent.

Yeah, Benson thought as a hint of anxiety gnawed at his insides, maybe the three seasoned old CIA dogs would just circle each other, sniffing and growling, posturing and provoking but finally just slinking back into the shadows, all standing down without any of them backing down, implicitly agreeing to a stalemate, calling the game a draw.

And perhaps it will be a draw, Benson thought with an uncharacteristic sinking in his gut. If Rhett didn't bite, the game was pretty much over. Kaiser couldn't go to Robinson with a he-said-she-said between Paige and Rhett. Without hard evidence Rhett could just as easily accuse Kaiser of activating Scarlet to silence Indy O'Donnell. It would be a finger-pointing mess, one that could result in Robinson souring on both Kaiser and Rhett, choosing someone like Bill Morris to head up the Agency once the Senator won the White House.

But shit, wasn't it Bill Morris who'd pushed hard to bring Rhett in from the shadows to Langley, Benson thought grimly. Hell, that might still keep Rhett in the game. For Kaiser there'd be no way back to the CIA, because you don't get

demoted from the Director's chair, you only get fired. Once Robinson lost faith in Kaiser he was gone, put out to pasture.

Along with Benson and Darkwater.

A flash of hot determination raged through Benson as he watched Kaiser deactivate the security system and push open the steel-plated front door. They were so close, Benson thought feverishly as he glanced over at the American flag hanging dark and silent on the shining flagpole near the front porch. Darkwater was so close to being invited into the White House with Robinson and Delilah. There was no way Benson could let this fail, no way his own decisions three decades ago could come back now to fuck this up.

He wouldn't let that happen.

Even if he had to sacrifice himself to see this mission through.

Now a burst of wild exhilaration roared through Benson as he suddenly saw it clearly, saw his own endgame in the muted colors of Old Glory on that grinning flagpole. His fingers brushed against the cold handle of his holstered Smith and Wesson handgun, and he grinned in the darkness.

Rhett Rodgers wasn't leaving this building alive.

Didn't matter if he kept his cool and didn't give them an excuse to kill him in self-defense.

Benson would do it in cold blood if it came down to it.

Take the fall himself just to get Rhett Rodgers out of the way.

Benson would be done for—no way he would let Kaiser and Jack cover up an unprovoked cold-blooded murder on U.S. soil. Benson would have to turn himself in—disappearing would only cast suspicion on Kaiser, hurting his reputation, which would defeat the entire purpose.

But with both Benson and Rhett out of the way, there'd be no more risk to Kaiser's reputation, no reason for Robinson to consider replacing him as CIA Director.

And Kaiser had to survive as CIA Director.

That was the only way Darkwater would survive.

Because whether Kaiser knew it or not, he was a Darkwater man. He could take this thing forward with the help of Ax and Amy and the rest of the Darkwater men and women.

They'd all seen how this living breathing conscious thing called Darkwater had evolved over the past seven years, how it had dragged all of them into its spinning vortex of cosmic

energy, how it had its own fate, its own destiny, its own mission.

A mission larger than the people within its dark hungry belly.

Yes, maybe Darkwater no longer needed Benson.

Maybe it was time for him to join Sally in the great beyond, time to take this game past the realm of flesh and blood, see if what he believed about the soul and the spirit was true, if consciousness really did survive physical death, if love really was eternal, if the bonds of man and woman forged in sex and violence truly did connect souls across lifetimes, across dimensions, transcending the borders of space, breaking the barriers of time.

Now that scintillating energy flooded Benson as he followed Jack and Kaiser into the brownstone, closed the steel door behind him after crossing the threshold.

A threshold that might very well be the last one he crossed in this lifetime, this dimension, this body of flesh and blood.



Rhett stared at the blood on his knuckles after pulling into his garage. He'd whipped a backhanded smack across Mercy's face to keep her from struggling on the drive back home. His knuckles had got her square on the cheekbone, rattling her cage enough that she lay gasping on the backseat.

He'd slipped plastic ties over Mercy's hands and ankles, duct-tape over her mouth as the little girl Cari watched in stricken silence, her body trembling as Rhett finished with her mother and then turned his masked face towards her.

"She'll be all right," Rhett had said gruffly, not sure why he even gave a shit about comforting this kid. Hell, they were both as good as dead anyway. No way Rhett could let them walk away after they'd seen his face. "Get in the back with your Mama. There we go. Good girl."

Cari had clambered into the backseat in a traumatized trance, her breath coming out in hyperventilating bursts, her body still trembling uncontrollably. Once again Rhett had felt an uncharacteristic stab of emotion, a wrenching in his chest from the palpable physical fear he'd put into this little girl.

Had his own infant daughter felt any fear when he'd put her down all those years ago? She was so tiny, Rhett remembered. So vulnerable, the way she'd looked at him with those big trusting eyes which had seemed remarkably focused for a week-old infant.

Once more Rhett had thought of Indy O'Donnell's eyes, thought of the strange resemblance between Scarlet and Indy, remembered that dreadful moment earlier when he thought he *knew* about Indy, could feel it clear like a cut, understood in some inexplicable way that they'd all been drawn together in that weird manner that sometimes happened in the shadows, when you were operating on the edge of reason, the frontiers of common sense, taking risks no ordinary human could handle, making choices that would fry the moral circuits of any mortal being.

The thoughts had spun through Rhett's mind as he carefully bound the little girl's wrists and ankles, taped her mouth shut, then tucked her shivering body between her mother and the seatback to make sure the kid didn't get hurt on the drive back to his home.

Why do you even give a shit if she gets hurt, Rhett had thought angrily as he gunned the black Chevy Suburban's V-8

engines and left the little convenience store in his exhaust fumes. You're going to kill them both anyway. Hell, you should have already fucking done it. Would make the drive less risky. Sure as hell make it easier to haul their bodies into the basement, where they would be dissolved into barrels of lye and simply poured down the reinforced drainpipes.

But of course Rhett didn't want to risk Diego seeing him kill them right outside the damn store. Mercy and Cari were insurance, and although Diego would suspect Rhett wasn't going to let them walk away alive, Diego would have to believe there was still a chance.

Enough of a chance that a cold-hearted Zeta killer like Diego Vargas would risk his own ass to save a woman with a kid that wasn't even his?

Logic said no fucking way.

But that strange wrenching in Rhett's heart said yes, like maybe he'd felt something in the way Diego had reacted when Mercy and Cari got taken, a subconscious signal that Diego wasn't going to let this mother-daughter combination end up as collateral damage, just two more casualties of whatever private war Diego thought he was fighting.

Rhett's mind had settled as the black Suburban glided onto the freeway. The license plates were covered with black leather, and along with the tinted windows, it would be clear to any cop or trooper in the DC-Baltimore area that this was a government agency car and was not to be pulled over. His hostages stirred in the backseat but weren't struggling. And so Rhett had relaxed, pulled off his silk mask, run his fingers through his hair, drifted the Suburban into the fast lane as his mind drifted back to Diego's CIA dossier.

And something stood out in Rhett's photograph-precise memory.

A snippet from Diego's Mexican Special Forces file.

Something about Diego's family being murdered by one of the Cartels. Retaliation for the government using the military against the Cartel. There were no further details about the killing or about whether Diego himself had been present at the time. But there was one detail that Rhett remembered with scintillating clarity.

Diego's family.

A wife and a child.

A mother and a daughter.

Rhett had almost swerved into the grassy median as the synchronicity hit him like a slap to the face. Of course it was just coincidence, he told himself ferociously as he steered his mother-daughter cargo back onto the road. He'd pushed away that vivid image of Scarlet's half-open eyes looking at him just like Indy's wide-open orbs seemed to glare right into him. That dreadful wrenching pulled stronger behind his chest, tightening his throat as he gripped the wheel so hard his fingers hurt.

That's when he'd noticed her blood on his knuckles. He'd been wearing those sheer medical-type transparent gloves, and Mercy's blood had smeared against the latex, clotting and drying to form a curious circular shape that reminded Rhett of those Rorschach inkblot images the CIA used in their psychological testing—*What do you see in this inkblot shape, Rhett Rodgers?*

You see what you want to see, Rhett had told himself as he came up to his exit, slowing down and pulling off the highway and taking the county road towards his home. As he'd turned the steering wheel the street lamps cast splinters of shadowy light on the shape the blood-smear had formed on the

translucent latex. It had startled Rhett, and he frowned and cocked his head.

The shape reminded him of something.

A circular motif, familiar because it had been on Rhett's grandmother's kitchen wall, right above the dining table. A standard artistic rendering of Mother Mary with Baby Jesus.

A woman cradling an infant in her arms.

Rhett snorted, blinked his attention back to the road. When he glanced back at the blood-smear he no longer saw the circular motif resembling that wall-hanging.

“Please don't become one of those people who sees Jesus in cloud formations and Mary in tornado funnels,” he'd muttered with a strangely nervous sneer as he finally got to his darkened driveway and gunned the engine down the tree-lined path to his well-hidden house.

He'd pulled into the four-car garage, relaxing as the heavy wood-paneled doors closed behind him. But as he opened the Suburban's back door and prepared to haul his hostages out, Rhett caught another glimpse of that blood-smear on his glove.

“For fuck's sake,” he growled, whipping off the glove and tossing it at the garage wall above the trash cans. “Soon you'll

be seeing your grandma's ghost reading from *Gone with the Wind*, her favorite part, where Rhett Butler is inconsolable after his darling Bonnie tragically dies.”

“It shows that even a rascal pirate like Rhett Butler has a heart,” his grandma had informed him. “Even a cold-hearted snake is vulnerable to human emotion, to the bonds of family, the love of a father for a daughter.”

Rhett stopped as the memory came back with sonic vividness.

Then suddenly, out of some deep place inside him, exploded a single sob.

Rhett staggered like he'd been shot. He blinked with shocked amusement, shaking his head to get the reverberation of that single sob out of his mind.

“What the fuck was that?” he muttered, shaking his head again as his heart did that weird wrenching thing, like there was some emotion it was trying desperately to serve up, something it had stored away for safekeeping, hiding it from the coldness that Rhett had cultivated so he could survive in the shadows, thrive in the shadows, *become* the fucking shadows.

Rhett stayed silent for what felt like a long time, waiting for the wrenching feeling to go away, forcing his mind back into sharp focus, reaching for that familiar coldness which had always been with him, which *was* him, as far as he knew, as far as he *wanted* to know.

Soon enough Rhett was back in cold control, and with a grunt he dragged Mercy's still-woozy body out of the backseat. He slung her over his shoulder like a sack, then grabbed Cari around the waist and tucked her under his arm against his side.

Cari's body quivered against Rhett's, and although that disconcerting wrenching didn't take over again, it seemed to have done some damage to his cold resolve.

Because when Rhett got them to his basement with its thick concrete walls which could smother a thousand screams, he couldn't bring himself to do what needed to be done.

Not yet, at least.

He locked them in the self-contained cell he'd built adjacent to his basement office. It had a toilet and sink, a couch and chair, a small table on which Rhett placed a couple of water-bottles and a few snack-bars. He untied Mercy and Cari, gestured with his head towards the couch, then sighed



and stepped back, hesitating before closing the heavy steel door, asking himself again why he wasn't just doing what had to be done eventually, should be done now so he was committed to this path.

“I know you will not let us go because we have seen your face,” came Mercy’s trembling voice as she cradled her daughter in her arms, huddling back on the couch. “But you do not need to kill Cari. She does not know what she saw, will never be able to identify you. Please. She is just a child. Just leave her somewhere safe where she will be found quickly by the police so they can put her in foster care.” She blinked, then swallowed. “Or if he ... Diego, I think you called him ... if he does what you want and gets in touch with you, then give Cari to him. She will be safe with him.”

Rhett stared, then snorted. “You didn’t even know his real name until you heard me say it. Do you have any fucking idea what kind of a man Diego Vargas is?”

Mercy met his gaze with a strikingly confident look in her dark eyes. “Yes. I know exactly what kind of man Diego is. I saw it in him. He will not hurt Cari.”

Rhett chuckled, shook his head as he backed out of the room. “You’re delusional if you think a man like Diego Vargas

gives a flying fuck about either of you. It's fifty-fifty that he even shows up tomorrow—and if he does, it'll be because he sees it's in his best interest to join forces with me.” He began to close the door, shaking his head again at the pitiful delusions caused by romantic love—if that was even possible with a man like Diego.

Mercy said nothing as the door closed, but through the closing crack Rhett caught a glimpse of the two prisoners looking up at him, mother cradling her child against her body, the downwards angle of Rhett's view making the scene look oddly reminiscent of that circular motif he'd seen in the blood-smear, like it was a sign from some unknowable force, a reminder that even a cold-hearted snake was vulnerable to human emotion.

The thought stayed with Rhett as he went upstairs and brewed a fresh pot of coffee.

It stayed with him as he drank cup after cup of the thick black coffee, watched the sunrise through the large picture window in his empty living room.

A room with no pitter-patter of little footsteps.

No touch of a woman's love.

No dog-bowl in the corner.

No family pictures on the walls.

All day he stared out the window as the clock counted down the seconds to that evening meeting, that looming showdown, that approaching endgame which Rhettt had figured would most likely be a nonevent but wasn't so sure about now.

Not after seeing that strangely confident look in Mercy's fiery dark eyes, like maybe the woman wasn't delusional, like maybe she *had* seen some glimmer of human emotion in Diego's hardened heart, his twisted soul.

Shit, maybe Diego Vargas would come through after all.

Diego peered through his night-vision scope. He'd made his way to the roof of that same apartment building, even though he was wary of being ambushed. After racking his brain for how that CIA man had found him, Diego figured that the guy had seen him in the Georgetown area, then gone back to traffic-cams to zoom in on the maintenance van's license plates, somehow tracked him down that way.

The van was gone now, and Diego should have been gone too, he told himself fiercely as he adjusted his scope to focus in on the three men who'd just emerged from Benson's gray Crown Victoria. Yes, he should be long gone, far away from this setup which was likely to leave Diego either dead or on the run with the full power of the CIA, FBI, DHS, and maybe even the damn mafia chasing him.

Diego grinned at the last thought, wondering what the American public would say if they knew the CIA's history with almost every mafia that had a U.S. presence—Italian, Irish, Cuban, Mexican, Russian, you fucking name it. Back when the Zetas were being trained in CIA-sponsored camps in Guatemala, a grizzled old former U.S. Army Green Beret

trainer had mentioned with a shrug that since the 1960s the CIA had used Deltas and Green Berets for assassinations outside the U.S. and mafia hitmen for taking out American citizens within U.S. borders.

“But Lee Harvey Oswald was not a mafia hitman,” Diego had pointed out. “As I recall, he killed a very prominent American citizen within U.S. borders. Some say he was put up to it by the CIA.”

The Green Beret had snorted. “Yeah, but Oswald didn’t fire a single shot. He was the patsy. The trigger-guy was a Miami-based mafia hitman paid by the CIA. Then they got Jack Ruby to put down Oswald. Ruby was connected with the Chicago Family. Don’t they teach you guys basic American history in Mexican Special Forces? Hell, the whole thing was textbook CIA.”

And so is this, Diego thought as he watched Benson, Kaiser, and a third man who would be the former Delta guy Jack Wagner survey the empty street with professional precision before entering the Senator’s empty townhome. *Si*, textbook CIA, which meant plots within conspiracies, twists around turns, double-crosses followed by back-stabbings neatly tied up in an explosion and pinned on a patsy who

coincidentally gets found dead in a ditch with two gunshot wounds at the back of his head which the FBI rules a suicide, case closed, move on, nothing to see here, go back to your smartphones *hombres* and *chicas*, there's a new video of two monkeys slapping each other while pooping.

Again Diego wondered what the hell he was doing here. No way that CIA guy was letting Mercy and Cari go after they'd seen his face. And Diego himself would be very disposable—if not a dangerous loose end—if he took out the damn CIA Director on behalf of another *puta* spook.

A spook named Rhett Rodgers.

Diego had spent the day scouring the Internet for every photograph that had anything to do with the CIA and Langley. He'd scanned every face in every image tagged as CIA or Central Intelligence or anything close to those keywords, looking for the face of that dark-eyed cool-headed *puta* motherfucker who'd proved himself good enough that Diego would be dead right now if that fucker had wanted it so.

But although Martin Kaiser's photograph was all over the place, along with a few mentions of a deputy director named Bill Morris, there were no photographs matching the man who now had Diego's *cojones* in a vise.

So he'd called Ernesto down near the Colombian border, in the headquarters of the fledgling Zeta Nation. Asked him to get in touch with a contact in Mexican Intelligence, see if he could pull basic personnel files for the top 20 or so CIA men stationed at Langley, photographs included. Ernesto had grumbled about the cost, but Deigo had shut him down with cold urgency.

The files and photos came through several hours later. Rhett Rodgers was towards the bottom end of the top 20, but still very high up in an organization of several thousand official employees. Diego had studied the file, noting with interest that Rhett Rodgers was sixty but had been officially employed by the CIA for just seven years. It seemed highly improbable that Rodgers had risen so high at Langley in less than a decade.

Which meant the guy had been *unofficial* CIA before that.

A deep cover operative. Undercover asset.

A fucking ghost.

Diego had closed the file and sank back into his single bed in the squalid one-room apartment just a few blocks from Mercy's now-closed store. It was mid-afternoon by then, and Diego had pretty much decided not to take the risk, not to take

the bait, not to trick himself into believing there was any chance for Mercy and Cari.

But when Rhett Rodgers checked out as a legit CIA player, Diego started to reconsider. It wasn't clear why Rodgers wanted Kaiser and Benson dead, but part of the reason had to be that Rhett Rodgers had a shot at being named the next CIA Director.

And *Madre de Dios*, Diego had thought feverishly that afternoon, having the new CIA Director owe you a favor was worth something, was it not? Especially a man clearly cut from the same cold-hearted cloth as Diego.

Diego's heart had pumped hot blood at that moment, almost like it was objecting, trying to remind him that having Rhett Rodgers's file did not change anything, that it was just an excuse for Diego justifying doing what he was going to do anyway, what he wanted to do no matter what the risk, what he fucking *needed* to do because it was his only chance, his only hope, his only way out of this pit of lonely darkness he'd dug for himself over the years, each new act of violence renewing his commitment to hell, digging his destiny, sealing his fate.

Because now something had changed.



Diego had glimpsed a flicker of light in his dark corner of the universe.

Like perhaps he could fight for a fresh fate.

Claw his way to a different destiny.

“*Despierta tonto,*” he’d shouted, smacking his open palms against the sides of his head, shaking his shaggy mane as that vision of Mercy and Cari seared his brain like he was melting down. “They are already dead, you idiot. You cannot save them. And why do you want to save them anyway? Why them, after so many others have died by your hand, on your orders? Because you think you can save yourself? Hah, you sad fool. A few months north of the border and you are getting soft like the locals, falling under the spell of this country that whispers seductive promises of freedom and happiness, salvation and second-chances, hopes and dreams.” He’d tugged at his beard, spat on the yellowed linoleum floor in disgust, tried to get those images out of his roiling brain before they merged with those long-repressed images of his own lost woman and girl, forcing out emotions that had been buried so deep they’d been compressed into dense packets of rock-hard physicality.

But the floodgates had opened that afternoon, and Diego found himself sitting on the edge of his sweat-soiled single

bed, head buried in his greasy palms, sobs racking his scarred body, tears seeping between fingers that had gouged out eyeballs and throttled throats, committed acts of depraved violence that could never be undone, never be forgotten, never be forgiven.

But what about the future, came the whisper from Diego's unravelling mind. A man cannot change the decisions of his past, but each day he makes fresh choices, does he not?

So what will you choose today, Diego Vargas?

And then Diego had pulled his hands away from his face and stood from his bed and walked to the window and gazed out, his tear-red eyes focusing on that distant strip-mall with the sign that said *Mercy*.

"You cannot turn your back on them," he told himself. "It might be pointless but you have to try. Make this choice and perhaps fate will turn in your direction. Perhaps destiny will look your way."

And then suddenly a strange peace had flooded Diego's heart. He couldn't be certain if it was the uncharacteristic emotional outburst or something deeper, but he was aware of a strange sensation of events shifting somewhere in the invisible space of the universe, like perhaps his patron *Santa Muerte*

had struck a deal with the merciful God of his childhood, joining forces to give Diego a shot at everything he wanted, both the good and the bad.

And part of what Diego wanted badly was to see John Benson dead.

Slowly his lips had tightened to a smile as his mind flicked forward to what might be possible if everything worked in his favor tonight. Rhett Rodgers was right in that it was increasingly unlikely that Diego would be able to kill Senator Robinson and his wife Delilah without getting caught. That bastard Benson seemed to have gotten the Senator to fortify his townhome and hire more security to travel with him as he campaigned around the country. And now, if what Rhett Rodgers said about Secret Service approving early protection for the Senator was true, Diego wasn't going to get anywhere close to Robinson without being made.

But if Rodgers was true to his word, then Diego might not even need to get rid of the Senator.

Of course, a CIA man's word was about as trustworthy as a snake in the dark, but Diego could play this game pretty damn well himself. Rodgers had found him once, but Diego wasn't going to get sloppy again.

Rhett Rodgers wasn't the only man who'd learned the secrets of the shadows, understood what it meant to be a ghost.

And so Diego had snatched up his burner phone, made a call to a Baltimore gun-dealer, praying that the guy could source some explosives that could do the job on Benson's car. Diego didn't need anything sophisticated—hell, he could make a pipe-bomb from stuff you found at Walmart if it came down to it.

But it didn't come down to it. Diego's guy knew a bent Army quartermaster from whom he bought surplus Beretta handguns, and within two hours Diego had a small block of C-4 plastic explosive with a remote detonator that would do just fine.

Now on the dark roof Diego pulled out the plastique from his black slingbag, squeezing it gently in his palm like one of those corporate stress-balls. He raised the scope to his eyes again, scanned the Senator's townhome once more, his rubber-soled shoes tapping noiselessly on the roof as he waited impatiently for Rodgers to make an appearance.

Benson, Kaiser, and Wagner were already inside the townhome, but Diego couldn't risk going down there now. Rodgers had assured Diego that he'd keep everyone inside for

at least twenty minutes to give Diego a comfortable window to plant the explosive and then get invisible. Diego needed to wait.

Not long, it turned out.

A thrill went through his black-clad body as a Chevy Suburban pulled up and parked a block away from the townhome, well out of range for what Diego was planning. He knew C-4 like an old *compadre*, and had carefully cut the block of plastique down to a size where anyone in Benson's car would be decimated but the blast radius would be kept to a minimum. The Cartels had turned Mexico into a war-zone, but here in *El Norte* it was still considered unusual for innocent civilians to be killed in the crossfire.

And Diego was fully aware that the blast would be blamed on him, since that rat Benson had warned both CIA and FBI that Diego Vargas might be in the country and gunning for the Senator.

Very risky to draw even more heat on him, but Rodgers was the only one who knew for certain that Diego had been aboard the *Rivington* and had made it ashore undetected. So long as Diego stayed undetected, Rodgers might very well keep his word about a future partnership. Killing a bunch of

civilians might endanger that, perhaps even bring the wrath of the U.S. government down upon the Zeta Nation—though that was unlikely, given the CIA’s secret hand in creating the Zetas all those years ago.

A grin broke on Diego’s face as the connections struck him as funny, almost scripted, like there was some grand design working itself out here, like seeds planted years ago were finally coming into season, stories that started separately now joining together like intertwined vines of a forest where you couldn’t tell where one tree ended and another began, like it was all an intricate embroidery on a cosmic curtain which was about to be raised, revealing the players in their positions, poised to deliver their lines.

And now it was time for Diego to get in position, take his place on the stage, read his lines from a script which he prayed had been rewritten to cast him as the hero instead of the villain, the star instead of the sidekick, the savior instead of the snake.

“Three snakes in a pit. Who strikes first?” Rhett grinned as he shook Kaiser’s hand, then Benson’s, finally greeting Jack with a fist-bump and a wink. “Note that I said *three* snakes, not four. I’ve learned the hard way not to insult a Delta guy, not even in a joke.”

Benson glanced at Jack, who was stoic and unreadable, his usual shit-eating grin nowhere in sight. The Delta man was all business, keeping his broad vest-clad body close to Kaiser’s stooped frame, ready to step in at the first sign of trouble.

But what troubled Benson the most right now was Rhett’s composure. Benson frowned inwardly, searching Rhett’s eyes for a sign of stress, a flash of fear, a whisper of worry. But the guy was unreadable.

Benson cursed silently, reminding himself that Rhett had survived twenty-three years completely on his own in the shadows. His skills of subterfuge and seduction had been sharpened by brutal necessity, raw survival. There was no method actor on earth who could match Rhett’s ability to play any role to perfection.

Even Benson and Kaiser couldn't match up with what Rhett had learned from those years in the shadows. Yeah, Benson and Kaiser had put in their time as ghosts, but they'd never been NOC operators, never been more than a phone-call away from a Special Forces extraction team if things got too hot.

Rhett never had that luxury, and it was paying off now.

The guy was controlling the energy in the room. Benson could feel it in his own stiffening body, sense it in the way Kaiser's gaze narrowed with apprehension. They'd both wondered how Rhett would play this meeting, if he'd be in full denial mode, pretend like this was really just a security walkthrough, make no mention of Paige Anderson and Benson's phony phone call that probably saved the kid's life.

"Expecting trouble?" Rhett shot a pointed glance at Benson's open jacket, to where the bulletproof vest was clearly outlined beneath his white Brooks Brothers shirt. "You guys know something I don't?"

Benson shrugged. "Diego Vargas is still out there."

Rhett snorted. "Says who? One of your off-the-books guys who wasn't even born when Diego slit his first throat?"



Benson chuckled. “Jack here says nobody slits throats anymore. They go for the kidneys now.”

“Then those vests aren’t going to help you two geezers.” Rhett flashed a toothy grin, then surveyed the large living room, his gaze lingering on the security cameras, each of which flashed a red blinker light. “Cameras turned off. And I suppose you guys aren’t wearing wires. Don’t want anything that happens here on the record, right?”

Kaiser shifted on his feet. Benson wondered if he’d made a mistake bringing Martin here. Kaiser was no slouch, had handled himself in active danger on both the Fay and Gale missions. But things were different for Martin now with Alice and the new twins. His mind was elsewhere, his responsibilities shifting from just the CIA to something closer to home.

Now a shiver of anxiety went through Benson’s uncharacteristically stiff spine. He wondered if he should just do it now, draw and fire before Rhett’s own keen intuition picked up on the uneasiness in the room. Two quick shots would do it. It would be too unexpected for anyone to react fast enough to stop Benson.

“Let’s get this over with.” Rhett turned abruptly towards the stairs, showing his back to Benson. “Security walkthrough, right? Sure. Whatever you say. Let’s start upstairs, shall we? You guys coming?”

Benson glanced at Kaiser, shook his head subtly for Kaiser to stay put, then strode towards where Rhett was starting up the stairs. “Right behind you.”

Rhett glanced over his shoulder at Kaiser and Jack, neither of whom had moved. “I thought Wagner was the guy with the tactical knowledge. He’s been posted here for months, knows the place better than anyone. Isn’t he going to join us upstairs?”

Benson swallowed. For a moment it looked like he might get Rhett alone in the upstairs, make it easy to end this quick and dirty. But Rhett was too sharp. The guy had turned his back on Benson, almost daring him to take the coward’s shot. Now Rhett was clearly trying to get both Benson and Jack upstairs.

Leaving Kaiser alone and unguarded?

Did Rhett have a sniper lined up outside?

Or maybe a drive-by shooting planned?

Unlikely, Benson decided. The windows were bulletproof, able to withstand high-powered sniper rifles and assault weapons. The steel door was blastproof, and Jack had made sure to slide the heavy deadbolt across so nobody could bust in. Besides, no way would Rhett trust a hired gun for something this sensitive. He'd do it himself or not at all.

Benson relaxed a bit. Nobody was getting to Kaiser in here without driving a damn tank through the walls. Still, Benson didn't want Kaiser alone for even a minute.

Kaiser spoke up just then. "We're all coming, Rhett. I want to make sure this place is sealed up tight. Secret Service has been dragging its feet getting the Senator approved for early protection, and I don't want anything happening on my watch."

"You mean *my* watch." Rhett's eyes gleamed. "This is my assignment, right, *Director* Kaiser? Now that the Senator asked you to get Benson and his merry band of mercenaries off the property."

Kaiser chuckled darkly, gestured with his head towards the stairs, waited for Jack to start moving, then fell in line behind him.

The tense little train of four armed men chugged up the sturdy wooden stairs. Rhett got to the second-floor landing, walked briskly along the corridor, pushed open the door to the master bedroom, strode to the window, rapped his knuckles against the heavy reinforced glass, then turned, crossed his arms over his chest, and sighed as Benson, Jack, and Kaiser entered the room.

“All right, how long do you want to play this game?” Rhett smiled with lazy confidence, taking a deep breath, his chest expanding to show pectorals surprisingly heavy with muscle. Benson wondered if he’d been injecting exogenous testosterone. The synthetic hormone was known to cause mood swings in high doses—sending you from ultra-cool to manic-aggressive in moments. Benson made a mental note as Rhett snorted with sudden impatience, glancing sharply at Kaiser. “Save the act, Martin. Whatever you have to say, say it. Whatever you want to do, fucking do it. We both know you’re finished as Director. Your loyalty to John is admirable, but it’s cost you more than it could possibly be worth. You’ve pissed away your reputation by covering for Benson’s Darkwater shitshows. And adopting those twins connected to that clusterfuck in Iceland sticks the fork in your career. Everyone knows you’ve stepped off the reservation just like

Benson—hell, *because* of Benson. The Senator’s starting to see it too, despite his wife’s soft spot for Benson and Darkwater. The only reason Robinson hasn’t asked the current President to replace you is because in a year he’ll be in a position to choose the next Director himself.”

“And you think that’s going to be you, Rhett?” Kaiser showed a tight half-smile. “You really think you’re going to get through the vetting process? Bill Morris brought you out of NOC and into Langley, but the fact remains that your history beyond eight years is a black hole, manufactured and sanitized, smoke and mirrors.”

Rhett grinned. “Exactly. That’s what makes it airtight. My background and record holds up to scrutiny from anyone outside the very top levels of the Agency. More than enough for Congress to approve the appointment. And that gives the soon-to-be-President Robinson all the plausible deniability he needs.”

Benson stiffened as he watched Kaiser and Rhett face off. It surprised Benson to see Rhett drop the charade so fast.

It also worried Benson. Was this planned or improvised? Impatience or provocation? Was Rhett trying to force a confrontation that escalated to violence, flipping the script

before Benson and Kaiser got a chance to get all the way through it?

No, Benson decided when he saw Jack brace his feet to allow for an explosive move at Rhett if this escalated to something physical. No way Rhett was dumb enough to think he could go one-vs-three and win in a straight-up firefight. And the guy loved himself too much to be even remotely suicidal when he still had a chance to win.

Once again Benson considered drawing his weapon and short-circuiting this whole thing. But the master bedroom was cozier than the open living room below, and all four of them were too tightly clustered for Benson to risk guns going off.

Besides, this wasn't Rhett trying to provoke a showdown, Benson thought again with rising certainty as he studied Rhett's suddenly relaxed posture, picked up an almost playful hint in his dazzling smile, like the guy was enjoying this, had thought the whole thing through and was gambling that neither Kaiser nor Benson could use that old video, was guessing that Paige hadn't given them anything concrete—maybe hadn't given them anything at all.

“Paige gave you up,” said Kaiser now, and Benson inhaled sharply, dropping his arm down along his side, close to his

holstered weapon. Kaiser was pushing forward with his own provocation—perhaps a bit early, but Benson let it play out. Kaiser might not have done NOC work, but he'd been a masterful provocateur out in the field, had spearheaded regime changes with Benson by his side, knew how to push buttons and pull levers. Benson just hoped he still had that ruthless edge which would allow him to take this all the way.

“Look, Rhett,” Kaiser continued. “We know you set Indy O'Donnell up to get to me. It was a solid effort, I'll give you that. But sometimes a coup doesn't work. Sometimes you can't get rid of the old guard that easy. You need to consider your next step very carefully. You aren't past the point of no return yet, but you're pretty fucking close.” Kaiser narrowed his eyes, a glint of dark light reminding Benson and everyone else in the room that the Director had forged his way to the top of the world's shadiest organization and wasn't about to just step aside for a challenger.

That wasn't how wolf-packs operated, Benson thought as that familiar excitement roared through him once more when he saw that his old friend still had some fire, still had some steel, still had some alpha in him.

And the old Alpha doesn't just slink away when a challenger comes sniffing around.

Rhett's eyes flashed with challenge, his posture tightening but just barely. He wasn't going to take the bait and draw his weapon, but he wasn't going to back down either.

Benson could see the wheels turning now, some of Rhett's cool façade stripped away by Kaiser's challenge.

But a challenge that Kaiser hadn't issued all the way, Benson thought with a frown. A challenge that had an implicit offer built in, an exit route for Rhett.

Back down. Acknowledge that you didn't pull off the coup. We can't prove anything, but we all know what you did. So bend the knee and take the hit. Resign with dignity. Cut your losses, leave the Agency voluntarily, fade away into the shadows. Take the draw instead of the full loss, Kaiser was offering with that *you-haven't-crossed-the-point-of-no-return* statement.

For a moment Benson panicked, wondering what his own move would be if Rhett did in fact back down, bend the knee, acknowledge that he'd tried an unsuccessful coup and it was over, time to slink away into the shadows.



Damn it, don't get soft, Martin, Benson thought as a sudden rage whipped through him. Don't be the gracious king who allows his defeated enemy to live. Rhett's not that kind of enemy. You can't turn him into an ally.

Kaiser should have stuck the knife in and twisted, Benson thought angrily. He should have pushed Rhett into a corner by saying that he was going to federal prison, bluffing that Paige had concrete evidence that would bury Rhett. Hell, Kaiser should have threatened to suspend him pending an internal investigation, threaten to maybe even go public with a full-blown criminal case involving the FBI. Didn't matter that the evidence was arguable. It was time to play on Rhett's emotions, draw him away from cold logic by igniting hot fear.

Push him, Martin, Benson thought furiously. Don't let him draw you into the trap of thinking he'll back down and retreat. Don't think you can win this game leaving Rhett alive. He'll never swallow the humiliation, never rest until he's avenged the insult. He's a fucking narcissist. You don't know him like I do, Martin.

But Kaiser stayed silent, and Benson saw with heartbreaking certainty that his old friend thought he could win this without killing Rhett. Some part of Kaiser couldn't

cross that line and kill a CIA man who'd served his country—  
not yet, at least.

Now Benson was acutely aware of how far his and  
Kaiser's paths had diverged when Martin chose to lead the  
CIA while Benson decided to stick to the shadows. CIA  
Director was a cross between king and father, and Kaiser was  
behaving far too much like a stern dad teaching his  
mischievous son a lesson.

But the CIA isn't a normal family, Martin, Benson urged  
with a savage glance. It's a den of snakes and you're the King  
Cobra. So fucking act like it, raise your dark hood, and finish  
it.

Finish it or I will.

Now Benson's hand moved to his belt, fingertips gently  
pulling his open jacket aside. But before he got to the weapon  
Rhett spoke.

"I didn't set anyone up. Never heard the name India  
O'Donnell before seeing the State Department alert about that  
mess over in Mumbai earlier today with the dead woman in an  
American ex-Delta's hotel room." Rhett's expression was cold  
stone again, blank and unreadable, like he'd decided not to  
retreat all the way but just take a step back, de-escalate a little,

tease out how much Kaiser knew, sniff out whether Paige really had given him up all the way. “Ice Wagner is one of your Darkwater guys, isn’t he?” He grinned now, shook his head. “Wait, is this meeting just a setup for another Kaiser-Benson cover-up? Am I going to be the patsy? Wow, I’m fucking honored.” He shook his head, snorted out a scoffing laugh. “You guys are a bunch of sad clowns.”

Benson rubbed his chin, frowning deep enough to go almost cross-eyed. No mention of recognizing Scarlet from that photograph. Was it possible Rhett didn’t look closely enough at the photograph of the dead NOC assassin?

Impossible, Benson thought as dread constricted his throat. Rhett was too thorough to have missed it. He had to have recognized Scarlet from the State Department alert, had to know that Benson had lied about her death thirty years ago.

But did it occur to Rhett that perhaps Benson had lied about another death?

Did Rhett line up those photographs of mother and daughter, Scarlet and India?

Did he see himself and Scarlet in their daughter’s eyes?

And if so, did he even give a shit—other than the fact that if Rhett hadn't actually killed Indy all those years ago, that video showed nothing more than attempted murder at worst, and they were well past the statute of limitations for both federal and Virginia state law.

Benson felt the game slipping away from him now. Rhett's masterful control over posture, expression, and intonation gave nothing away.

So Benson slowed the game down, watching Rhett's eyes for something, for anything, a flinch, a flicker.

And then Benson saw it.

Or rather, he *felt* it.

Maybe it was wishful thinking, overactive imagination, seeing what he wanted to see. But Benson had made it this far trusting his gut, and it was all he had left.

Rhett knew about Indy, Benson decided.

Not just that, but maybe Rhett cared.

Cared in a way that might still make him snap, provoke him to go for Benson, ignite a deep-seated need to avenge what Benson did to him.

What Benson took from him.

Benson took a breath, praying that maybe there was a vulnerability in Rhett's cold heart, that perhaps thirty years of loneliness had made its mark, opened Rhett up to the most powerful weapon in existence:

Human emotion.

So Benson pushed forward, tried to trigger that emotional weapon.

“You know damn well who Indy O'Donnell is, Rhett,” Benson whispered, fingers closing around his gun as he backed away from Kaiser to make sure nobody else got shot. “You know who she is to you. And she's going to know too. I'm going to make damn sure of that. She's going to know what you did to her, Rhett. She's going to know what you *are* to her.”

“He’s nobody to me. Not anymore.” Indy shrugged in the passenger seat of the two-door Jeep Wrangler that had been waiting for them in the JFK Airport parking lot, fueled and ready, keys taped beneath the left rear wheel. “There’s no anger left in me, Ice. No hatred. I don’t know if going through that craziness on the plane liberated me from all those dark emotions. I think it did, but who knows ... maybe if I’d learned about it sober I’d never have felt any anger or hatred at all. After all, it wasn’t personal.”

Ice kept his eyes on the road, swallowing hard to control his own anger which had been simmering for hours now, ever since that insanely cathartic scene on the plane, where they’d both felt Indy’s anger and hatred like it was a living breathing entity.

Ice’s grip on the steering wheel tightened as he took the Georgetown exit from I-95. He’d driven just above the speed limit, making perfect time from JFK to where they were now within Washington city limits. They’d gotten off the plane without any trouble, made their way into the main terminal through one of the doors on ground level, beneath the

passenger jetways. Way less risky than trying to sneak out of the airport through the main service gate. So less than three minutes after Jack's friendly union guys popped the baggage hatch and promptly took their break, Ice and Indy were walking through JFK's crowded Terminal C concourse, the warmly familiar signs of American fast food sending waves of relief through them both.

They'd hit the restrooms, grabbed blueberry muffins and large cups of hot coffee, and twelve minutes later Ice was handing a parking-lot stub to an attendant and paying in cash, the throaty rumble of the Wrangler's engine reassuring like a mother's love.

Except now, almost five hours later, as Ice rumbled the Wrangler around Dupont Circle towards Georgetown, he wasn't thinking about a mother's warm love but a father's cold hatred.

"Your father tried to murder you. Not once but twice. And you don't take it personally?" Ice did his best to stay calm. It usually came easy, but something had been building in him for hours now. Hours watching Indy snuggled up against his body as their airborne chariot brought them home. Hours wondering what kind of a man could find it in himself to do what Rhett

Rodgers had done. Hours during which Ice's anger simmered and seethed until it turned to red-hot rage, a burning determination that Rhett Rodgers was not walking out of that building alive.

Because this *was* personal.

It was personal to Ice.

“Wait, are *you* taking this personally?” Indy frowned at him as Ice drove around the Dupont Circle roundabout and entered the swanky lamplit streets of DC's Georgetown neighborhood. “Ice, we talked about this on the plane. You can't just kill a high-ranking CIA official in the middle of DC. You'll go to federal prison, maybe even get the death penalty. This is Benson's game, so let him play it the way he wants. We're going to show up, see if my presence spooks Rhett into doing something stupid.”

“He's already done something stupid,” Ice growled, gunning the Wrangler to make it through a traffic light just as it turned red. “He tried to kill you when you were defenseless, completely vulnerable, unable to protect yourself.” He swallowed thickly, shook his head as he slowed down to take a left turn onto the Senator's quiet street. “And yeah, this is Benson's game, which is all the more reason why I need to



take control and finish it myself. Benson is playing a game that's bigger than just the two of us. Which means he will absolutely sacrifice us if he thinks it serves the bigger picture.”

Indy's frown cut deeper. She shook her head firmly.

“Benson saved my life when I was that defenseless infant. You heard Scarlet telling me how Benson ran out of her apartment with me in his arms, desperate to revive me even though it appeared I was dead. He saved me, Ice. Once for sure, and probably twice. And I definitely take *that* personally. Don't you?”

Ice gripped the wheel tighter, glowering at the empty street, unable to counter Indy's argument. Benson was ambiguous like the trickster coyotes of myth and legend, somehow walking that razor's edge between good and evil, darkness and light, heaven and hell.

Just like the other Darkwater guys said.

Still, Ice thought, this mission was different, more complex, with far more players involved, way bigger stakes. The earlier missions didn't have the future of the United States on the roulette wheel. What might happen tonight could change the direction of the CIA and the White House—and by that measure the trajectory of the entire world.

No shit Benson had sounded anxious when Jack talked to the guy. Benson had been around the block a few times. Forty years in the CIA meant the guy had made some hard decisions, many of which probably still weighed on Benson's conscience.

But he'd made those hard decisions anyway.

Sacrificed pawns and knights to protect kings and queens.

Ice had seen how the spooks worked. They were patriots to the death, just like Deltas and SEALs and Rangers and Green Berets. But damn, those CIA guys played close to the edge of ethics, the margins of morality.

Because somebody needed to be out there on that fine line between good and evil.

It took all kinds of patriots to keep America safe from the monsters.

Now Ice exhaled, letting out a bit of steam, relieving some of the pressure. The Senator's home was coming up, and he slowed the Wrangler to a crawl, then slid into a parking space a block away.

He turned off the engine, took a slow breath, exhaled even slower. Then he took his hands off the wheel, took Indy's soft hand in his big paw.

Immediately he felt that now-familiar tingle go through him, that spark of energy which reminded him of what they'd just been through together, what they'd experienced in the mind-melting madness of their journey home.

A journey that wasn't all the way complete.

Which meant they weren't all the way home yet.

"Look, Indy," he said softly, gazing into her eyes, taking in her beauty as he pushed away the sickening thought that this might be the end for them both. He forced a smile, doing his best to suppress the trickle of dread tugging at his heart. "We don't know what's waiting for us in that house. I hate going into a situation with incomplete information, but I'm used to it, trained for it."

"So am I," Indy said firmly, her eyes shining with what Ice knew was a mix of fear and excitement. "We've talked about this too, Ice. I need to see Rhett face to face. More than that, he needs to see *me* face to face. I am the centerpiece of Benson's game here. I'm the only one that might be able to trigger Rhett into losing his cool, doing something that justifies taking him out."

Ice sighed. "I'm still worried about what it might trigger in you, Indy. We should be at the hospital right now doing a brain

MRI after that seizure on the plane. In fact, listen, let's just—”

“No, *you* listen,” Indy said, squeezing his hand and leaning close, her gaze cutting into him with a sharpness that retained some of that LSD-induced glint. “I have the advantage over Rhett, don't you see? What you and I went through together just pulled every emotional trigger that was left to pull in my psyche. And you got me through it, Ice. And because of you, I'm stronger for it. *We* are stronger for it. I know it and you know it. And I think maybe that was Benson's plan—to give us enough time to confront all of that, to win that psychological battle so we could enter this physical battle with an advantage.” She smiled now, leaned in closer, her gaze cutting deeper, her love shining brighter. “Enter this battle together, Ice. Win it together. This is our path to forever. I saw it clearly when I was losing my mind. We both did.”

Ice chuckled darkly. “Well, that settles it, I guess. We saw it clearly when we were certifiably insane. Yup. That makes perfect fucking sense.” He rolled his eyes, but couldn't quite pull it off with the same conviction as before that mind-bending flight through madness.

Indy giggled. “That's not a very convincing eye-roll.” She smiled, sighed out a breath, then puckered her lips expectantly.

“Now, are you going to kiss me before we enter the arena? Just so that fate knows it’s our story, not Benson’s?”

Ice tried to groan but could only manage a grin. This woman turned on every protective instinct in his masculine heart, but at the same time she was his partner, his co-warrior, someone who would fight by his side. He hated that she was right, but he also loved it.

“I love you, Indy,” he whispered, leaning in and smothering her puckered mouth with his manly maws.

“I love you too, Ice,” she murmured into his mouth, her words drowned out by the buzzing in Ice’s brain.

The kiss lingered for a long moment, reminding Ice of how they’d lost track of time on the flight, how they’d made love for what felt like a frantic flash but turned out to be an impossible-to-imagine six hours. Maybe those Darkwater SEALs weren’t just lost-at-sea sailors with their drunken musings about how space and time were illusions.

Be that as it may, Ice had no illusions about the deadly reality of what might transpire at the meeting just down the block from them.

Finally they broke from the kiss, and Ice peered through the windshield towards the Senator's townhome. Benson's boat-sized Ford Crown Victoria was parked outside between two traffic cones. The black Chevy Suburban parked on the next block was probably Rhett's.

Which meant all the players were in their places.

The stage was set.

The cards were dealt.

Now all they could do was play it out.

You're played out, Benson thought with a sickening dread in his gut. Rhett had flinched at the provocation, but just barely. He wasn't going to lash out, not yet at least, maybe not at all.

There was no sign of Ice and Indy yet, and perhaps it wouldn't matter anyway, not with the kind of self-control Rhett was displaying right now.

Which meant Benson was suddenly down to his last option.

We blew it, Benson thought angrily. Things moved too fast. The timing was off. Rhett led everyone upstairs and then forced the issue by dropping the charade and challenging Kaiser with that taunt about being washed up as Director, about all of them being sad clowns in another Darkwater circus.

No, *you* blew it, Benson seethed at himself. You left too much to chance, went all-in when you should have folded your cards. But no, you think you're a fucking wizard, some kind of mystical magician. Hell, Indy doesn't even know Rhett is her father. And you were going to spring it on her at this meeting?

You'd be more likely to trigger *her* into doing something stupid than Rhett.

Hell, maybe Kaiser isn't the one who should be put out to pasture, Benson told himself. It's you that's lost your edge, John. An over-the-hill cowboy shooting blanks at shadows.

Benson felt beads of sweat prick his brow. He was losing track of time, wasn't certain how long it had been since anyone had said a damn word in this tense bedroom which suddenly felt smaller than a box. Now he realized his hand was on his holstered gun, frozen like he'd been caught mid-draw, indecision stopping his advance.

But maybe the move for his gun was a good thing, Benson realized when he saw a flash of doubt in Rhett's eyes, like Rhett had suddenly seen that Benson might be prepared to sacrifice himself to win this game, kill Rhett in cold blood and take the fall, make himself the patsy in his own game.

"So that's your game." Rhett's voice broke the silence, his gaze flicking from Benson's gun to Benson's eyes. He glanced at Kaiser, then back at Benson. "You've confessed all our sins from thirty years ago to Father Kaiser, and it appears he's forgiven you, if not me." He flashed a manic grin, then went cool again just as fast. "Which means you've shown Kaiser the



video, Paige as well. That's how you turned Paige against me, didn't you?" He shook his head, licked his lower lip, which Benson noticed bore signs that he'd been plucking at it. "But we both know that video doesn't mean shit anymore. Hell, it wouldn't hold up even if I *had* killed her all those years ago. No way Kaiser lets you leak it to Robinson or the FBI or the press. It makes him look like a whiny snitch, makes you look like the scheming cheating sonofabitch you've always been."

Benson narrowed his eyes, holding back a tight smile as Rhett dropped at least part of the façade, switching tactics from defense to offense, taking a step closer to what Benson hoped was the point of no return, past which Kaiser's deal to stand down would be off the table.

Benson took his time to reply, went over what Rhett had just said.

Or rather, what Rhett *hadn't* said.

The guy hadn't even *tried* to deny that Indy O'Donnell was the daughter Rhett thought he'd murdered three decades ago.

No scoffing protests.

No demands for DNA evidence.

No denial at all.

Just acceptance.

So maybe it did mean something to Rhett.

Maybe *she* meant something to Rhett.

Even if Rhett didn't completely know it yet.

The revelation sent a tingle through Benson, and he took a slow breath, his mind racing as he tried to use this new insight and launch a fresh attack.

Slowly Benson's cool confidence oozed back into him. He smiled lazily, gazed dreamily into Rhett's eyes. "She's beautiful, isn't she? Your daughter?"

Rhett blinked twice.

Enough of a tell that Benson knew it was still game-on.

"Fuck you," Rhett whispered, flashing that borderline manic smile again, reminding Benson of the mood-swings that sometimes accompanied high-dose testosterone injections.

"You had no right."

Benson sensed Kaiser shift on his feet, noted Jack's hand moving to his own weapon, felt himself regaining control of the room's energy.

“You gave up your right to be a father, Rhett.” Benson smiled coolly, slowing his speech to a taunting drawl. “Just like Scarlet gave up her right to be a mother. You two deserve each other. Back then and now.” He chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m sure she’s waiting for you in hell.”

Rhett licked his lower lip again, flashing that wild grin for the third time, his eyes burning with what Benson hoped was the explosion that would end this game.

Silence fell across the room.

Somewhere a bathroom faucet leaked a single drop.

A floorboard creaked beneath their feet.

A vent above them hissed out a breath of forced air.

Then suddenly Rhett’s shoulders relaxed.

And Benson’s heart sank.

Rhett grinned, letting out a sharp exhale, clearly relieved that he’d caught himself in time, regained control before Benson pushed him over the edge. “Nice try, but it’s not going to work, John. You want to take me down, you’re going to have to do it in cold blood. And make the CIA Director an accessory to murder and a liar on the record.” He grunted in Kaiser’s direction. “Not that Martin would mind. He’s

compromised himself enough for his old buddy Benson.”

Rhett shrugged coolly, then flicked his gaze towards Jack.

“But what about you, kid? You going to put your name on a cover-up too? Perjure yourself on the stand? Swear under oath that Rhett Rodgers drew his weapon first and the honorable John Benson had no option but to defend himself, defend his country, defend the entire world?”

Jack had the discipline to hold his frame and stare blankly at Rhett, not saying a damn word but not looking away either. Kaiser’s face was a dark cloud, though Benson was certain most of that anger was self-directed for allowing himself to get dragged into another Darkwater mission, one that looked very likely to be the last.

“Thought so,” said Rhett, barely masking his contempt. “Well, then we’re done here. You guys are played out.” He sighed in Kaiser’s direction, then glanced at Benson with that sneering smile. “Hey, I get it. We’re all CIA. Baiting someone into overreacting is a tried-and-true method of generating just cause to take somebody out—hell, we’ve used it to take *countries* out. Provocation. Reaction. Execution. Textbook CIA. But you only get one shot at it before your target wises up. You miss that shot and it’s over. We all know that.” He

straightened his jacket, huffed out a breath. “You can still go directly to Robinson with that video, I guess. Roll the dice that it hurts my reputation more than it does Kaiser’s.” He chuckled dryly. “That might very well be the case, but nobody comes out looking clean if all this gets exposed. Babies and blackmail isn’t going to sit well with a family man like Marcus Robinson and his baby-producing machine Princess Delilah. Fuck, I don’t remember the last time that woman *wasn’t* pregnant.”

Benson stiffened as Rhett checked his watch, glanced casually towards the open door leading to the corridor and the stairs. Once Rhett walked out of this house Benson would never get another chance.

Benson shot a glance out the bedroom window. The street was empty. Nothing but his silent car sitting between the traffic cones.

It was all on Benson now.

But Rhett was right that Benson would rather not make Kaiser an accessory to murder, wasn’t going to force Jack Wagner to bear false witness.

It was time for Benson to exit the game.

Alone.

No more favors from fate.

No more deliverance from destiny.

Benson drew his gun.

“I’ll walk you out, Rhett.” Benson pointed the weapon at Rhett’s head. “Downstairs. Now.” He flicked his gaze towards Kaiser and Jack. “You two stay here. You’ll know when it’s safe to come down.”

Rhett stared in half-amused disbelief tinged with a flash of fear. “You’re crazier than I thought.”

“John, put the gun down.” Kaiser stepped forward, but Jack grabbed his arm to keep him from getting between Benson and Rhett. “Hell, let go of me.”

“Absolutely do not let go of him, Jack.” Benson’s voice was cold steel. He could already feel himself separating from his body, his soul preparing to exit the arena. He was a single trigger-pull away from the end of the line. Sure, there’d be a host of formalities once he was arrested. Maybe a plea down from first-degree capital murder, death penalty taken off the table in consideration for his years of service or some nonsense like that. Or maybe they’d just send him to Gitmo.

The details didn't matter. What mattered was that half the Agency already considered Benson to be a wacko, unhinged, off the rails. This would only confirm what many already believed. And with both Rhett and Benson off the board, Kaiser had a damn good chance of hanging on to the job. The stain on Kaiser's reputation would eventually wash off.

And Darkwater would survive.

That's all that mattered anymore.

After all, Darkwater was Benson's baby, wasn't it?

"They're on their way, you know. Ice and Indy." Jack's voice cut through the cold shroud falling over Benson's consciousness. "They'll be here any minute."

Benson shook his head even as Jack's words sent the tingle of a thought down his spine, a thought that pushed him to double-down on this move.

A move that Benson suddenly realized just might call forth the emotions that he thought had slipped out of reach.

"Won't matter now," Benson grunted, trying to be cold and convincing even though the excitement was starting to burn hot. "That play is dead. This is the only way now." He glanced

at Rhett, gestured towards the door with the gun. “Come on, Rhett. Downstairs. Now.”

Rhett didn't move. He stood his ground, met Benson's gaze, held his arms out wide, exposing his broad chest. “Do it here. In front of Kaiser and Jack. Make them cover for you. Bring them down with your double-crossing backstabbing ass.”

Benson shrugged coolly. “They won't need to cover for me. I'll be turning myself in. Everyone's time comes sooner or later. This is my time. Yours too, Rhett. You had a good run. We both did. Now move it so we don't get blood and brains all over Delilah's clean bedspread.”

“John, listen to me, damn it!” Kaiser was shouting now as Jack held him away from the line of fire. “You aren't thinking straight. Put the fucking gun down and let him walk away. It's not worth it.”

Benson cast a sharp glance at Kaiser, gun still aimed squarely at Rhett. “Damn right it's worth it. This is bigger than just us, Martin. You need to take this thing forward after I'm gone. Take Darkwater forward. See where it goes once Robinson and Delilah get to the White House.”



Kaiser stared, then shook his head and mouthed a silent expletive. “This is mind-numbingly insane even for you, John.”

Benson chuckled. “Nah, this is textbook CIA. How many times have we eliminated someone and set up a patsy to take the fall? Well, this time I’m the fall-guy in my own damn scheme. You’ve got to appreciate the irony, Martin. What about you, Rhett? You like the twist in our dark tale?”

Now real fear flickered in Rhett’s eyes.

Exactly what Benson wanted to see.

Exactly what Benson was gambling on.

That it wasn’t the darkness of death that Rhett really feared.

It was missing out on the solitary flicker of light in his life.

A candle he’d tried to extinguish but somehow still burned, casting a sliver of heavenly light in the darkness of Rhett’s shadow.

“Let me see her first,” Rhett suddenly blurted out. “Jack said she’s on her way. Let me see her first.”

Benson did his best to mask a smile. He glowered down the sights of his raised weapon, then huffed out an impatient

breath, flicked a harsh gaze in Jack's direction, then gestured towards the door.

“All right,” he said gruffly. “We'll wait for them downstairs.”

Rhett nodded, walking slowly out the door. Benson followed, flashing a knowing look at Kaiser, whose taut face relaxed immediately with crushing relief.

“You two stay here,” Benson said, trying to maintain his cold composure even though his insides were sparkling and streaming like the skies on the Fourth of July.

And it had all been sparked by Benson's genuine threat to kill Rhett in cold blood.

Benson saw it now, and it almost brought him to his knees when he realized how close he'd come to pulling that trigger.

But the irony was that he *had* to come this close to really doing it, *had* to convince himself that it was the only way, *had* to be so far gone that he almost toppled over that razor's edge between good and evil, right and wrong, morality and murder.

Because that was the only way to generate authentic emotion in himself.

The only way to trigger authentic emotion in Rhett.

To ignite Rhett's desperate yearning to see his daughter in the flesh before he died.

So without even knowing he was doing it until it was done, Benson had armed that deadly weapon of human emotion.

Now it was up to Ice and Indy's fate to pull the trigger.

And up to their destiny to make sure the weapon was pointed in the right direction.

Diego pointed his weapon in the direction of the approaching footsteps. He'd been under Benson's car, fixing the C-4 plastic explosive to the underside, equidistant beneath the front seats to make sure both Benson and Kaiser got the brunt of the blast. But just as Diego armed the detonator and was about to roll out from beneath the car, he saw headlights flash past the end of the block, heard the row rumble of a Jeep's engine in the not-so-far distance.

He'd frozen in place, held his breath, hoping to heaven and hell that the Jeep drove past and disappeared. But instead it parked a block away, and moments later two sets of footsteps approached along the deserted sidewalk.

Diego silently released the safety on his 9mm Beretta, knowing that if he was forced to fire, it was game over for everyone.

Most of all Mercy and Cari.

So he prayed in his mind, prayed not just to Saint Death but to the God of his childhood, that very same God who'd taken his wife and daughter and filled his heart with hate and anger.

He prayed for the chance to finish this mission as a savior.

He prayed for a second chance at getting into heaven.

A second chance that Diego knew was his last chance, his only chance.

Because he understood that if he lost this woman and child, it would break whatever was left in him that could still be broken.

The footsteps drew closer, slowing as they approached the Senator's brownstone.

A man and a woman.

They stopped beside the silent car, so close Diego could have tied the laces of the man's military-style boots.

Diego stopped breathing, very nearly stopped his heart from beating.

Those boots turned towards the car, like the man was looking in through the window.

And then those boots turned away.

The couple walked to the front door.

The man knocked twice, called out Benson's name.

The door opened, then slammed shut.

The deadbolt slid across from the inside.

Diego exhaled.

The relief was followed by exhilaration.

God had heard him.

Some kind of God, anyway.

He rolled out from beneath the car, moving quickly across the street, disappearing into the shadows as he made his way back to the building from where he could watch the scene unfold, end the game his way.

Minutes later he was back in place on the roof, safe and undiscoverable, the detonator in his hand, gratitude in his heart, his body humming with a beautiful sense that the universe had turned in his direction after all.

Yes, Diego thought with a smile as he raised the scope to his eyes. Maybe the script had indeed been rewritten with him as the star not the sidekick, the hero not the villain, the savior not the snake.

“Save your breath, you snake.” Ice squared his shoulders at Rhett, his broad body firmly between Indy and the man she knew was her father, knew not from his face or his eyes, not from his voice or his smile, but from something deeper, the physical knowledge which still lingered in her muscles and tissues and organs and blood, a visceral certainty which matched what she’d felt in the depths of madness, at the heights of insanity. “Because you’re not going to be breathing much longer.”

Indy placed her hand on Ice’s bulging, twitching, tensed-up triceps. “He hasn’t said anything yet, Ice.”

Ice’s skin was burning hot to the touch. He shrugged her hand off his arm, glancing briefly over his shoulder to make sure Indy was protected by his body. “And let’s keep it that way. There’s nothing he can say that’s going to save his life.”

Indy gulped back a sudden flash of panic. She wasn’t sure if Ice was just posturing to provoke Rhett or if this rage was real. It felt ominously real, like maybe Ice had been faking the calmness out in the car just to avoid an argument.

Had he been lying to her or to himself when he agreed to play it cool, to flip that switch to ice and stay far away from fire?

Either way, this whole thing felt dangerous and on edge, Indy thought.

Especially with Benson standing off to the side, shiny silver handgun pointed squarely at Rhett.

Pointed at her father.



I am her father.

The certainty almost brought Rhett to his knees. It sure as hell took his breath, took his voice, took his vision. He swayed on his feet, swallowing hard and blinking harder as he fought to stay conscious and upright.

Through his blinking vision the girl's eyes came into vivid focus, and now Rhett was flooded with warmth and yearning, regret and loathing, a wrenching retching racking range of emotions both dark and delightful as he looked upon what he and Scarlet had created.

And if they'd created this beautiful bright woman with eyes that burned with both innocence and wisdom, fearlessness and femininity, strength and softness, then hell, maybe Rhett and Scarlet weren't all the way dark, weren't all the way evil, weren't all the way forsaken.

Rhett's lips moved now, but no sound emerged, certainly no words. He was transfixed by the sight of his daughter, oblivious to the gun pointed at him, ignorant of the clear and obvious threat posed by this seething storming Delta killer

who was burning with a protective fire so hot Rhett could almost see the flames.

Ice Wagner stood squarely in front of Indy, but she leaned her head to the side to meet Rhett's gaze, to hold it long enough to communicate something that Rhett understood in his body not his brain, in his heart not his head, in emotion not words.

You are nothing to me, the girl's eyes were saying as they studied him with curiosity more than coldness, like Rhett was not much more than a biological fact in her life, a footnote from her past.

The thought wrenched at Rhett's gut, bringing on a sinking feeling of despair, of meaninglessness, impotence, irrelevance.

Then suddenly it hit Rhett that maybe Indy's cool detachment was because she didn't know.

Yes, maybe she didn't know.

Of course she didn't know!

All she and Ice knew was that Rhett had set O'Donnell up, right?

Wagner was just pissed off about the setup.

Indy was just curious about the guy who'd picked her as a patsy in his political game.

Now relief rushed through Rhett. Hope soared in him. Anticipation ignited his heart. She just didn't know, he told himself feverishly. Once she knew, then he'd see the reaction, feel the emotion, satisfy that yearning hunger to connect with her, to be acknowledged by her ...

To be loved by her?

The thought was preposterous, but something in Rhett's calloused heart almost exploded with overwhelming warmth. He thought of that single solitary sob which had burst forth back at the house. He remembered that strange coincidence with the mother-and-child shape formed by the blood clotted on his knuckles.

He opened his mouth to speak, to tell her what she must not yet know, must not yet understand, must not yet see in his eyes, must not yet feel in his heart.

But Benson's voice came through first.

"You know, don't you?" Benson said to Indy.

Indy blinked twice, her gaze still fixed on Rhett's eyes, unflinching in its honesty, devoid of both accusation and

judgement. “Yes.”

Rhett’s heart sank.

Benson chuckled. “How?”

Indy smiled. “It’s a long story. Maybe we’ll tell you someday.”

“*We?* Oh, hell, I cannot wait to give Kaiser the *told-you-so* treatment.” Benson was grinning now, and Rhett felt his own blood start to heat up when he saw how Indy’s pretty face lit up in a smile as she moved a step closer to her big Delta protector, flashed a warm look in Benson’s direction like *he* was more of a father than Rhett, like everyone in the room was in on some private joke except Rhett, like maybe Rhett *was* the fucking joke.

“You *know?*” Rhett snarled, the words finally making their way out. “What exactly do you know? Do you know that Benson lied to me, lied to your mother, lied to you?”

Indy turned that heartbreakingly unaffected gaze back to Rhett. “I know Benson saved my life twice. Just like I know you tried to kill me twice.” She shrugged. “Oh, don’t worry, so did my mother. Twice. But I don’t hold grudges. No family is perfect, I guess.” She smiled now, still calm and composed

like she'd already processed it all, had somehow managed to unearth and overcome every hidden emotion, pull every psychic trigger, discharge all those internal weapons and render them harmless, render herself indestructible.

At first Rhett couldn't understand the dark humor. He wondered if his daughter was a cold-hearted psychopath, incapable of normal human emotion—not so different from Mama and Papa after all.

But that wasn't it.

Rhett knew that wasn't it.

He already sensed Indy had somehow gotten the best of him and Scarlet, not the worst.

He studied her face, watched her eyes.

And then in a flash he understood.

She's faced her own shadow and won the battle, Rhett realized with a sudden rush of fatherly pride, furious and frantic, roaring and raucous, thundering and terrific. Hell, she's faced her own shadow and integrated it, accepted it, embraced her darkness before it destroyed her light.

That's the secret behind her unflinchingly honest gaze, that innocent but knowing look devoid of judgement, cleansed of

hatred, purged of anger.

Yes, this woman had been through an experience that forced her shadow into the light, forced her to face that shadow, to do battle with her own darkness.

And somehow she won that battle.

Somehow she came through it intact instead of insane, complete instead of crushed, magnificent instead of mad.

Rhett didn't know how, but then he saw the deadly protective glint in Ice's eyes and he saw how, felt how, understood how his daughter made it through her dark night of the psyche, her struggle with the serpent, her dance with the demon.

Love.

And suddenly Rhett was overwhelmed by it. It flooded his heart with warmth, spun his consciousness into circles, speckled his vision with stars.

He stood there paralyzed with psychic pleasure, feeling things moving into place in his own psyche, like he was integrating the last missing pieces of his own splintered shadow.

Rhett saw it in his mind as it was happening, understood that the shadow was neither dark nor light, that a man's shadow contained only what was hidden, only what he refused to bring to the light, buried in the darkness of night.

Rhett's entire life had been deception and betrayal.

Which meant Rhett's shadow contained not hatred but love, not cruelty but compassion, not anger but adoration.

And it was all coming out now.

She brought it out in me, Rhett understood in speechless delight as he felt himself becoming whole in a way he didn't imagine possible, complete in a way that almost destroyed him.

He stood there like a palm swaying in a desert storm, not sure if anyone could tell from the outside what was happening on the inside.

It took several long moments, the sort of slowed-down time which passed as seconds on the outside but eons on the inside.

An inside which was now *all* of him.

The past and the present.

The good and the bad.

The demon and the dad.

He reveled in the sensation for as long as he could. But he knew it would not last, and he exhaled slowly as that surge of positivity subsided, his wholeness settling back into the equilibrium that was the real Rhett Rodgers.

Too much past to overcome the present.

Too much bad to be anywhere close to good.

Too much demon to ever be a dad.

And slowly Rhett felt the newfound spring of love harden to the familiar crust of hatred, the fresh flood of humility evaporate from the scorching heat of ambition.

An ambition that was his to seize.

Rhett smiled now as he saw everything fall into place in his spinning mind. That fleeting glimpse of positive emotion had completed the puzzle, closed the loop, squared the circle. It was just enough light for him to see the vastness of his darkness, recommit to it because he *was* it, had always been it, would always be it.

That was his role in this cosmic drama, and it was beautiful.



Yes, it was beautiful, Rhett thought as he saw it all in a grand sweeping vision of choice and coincidence, circumstance and serendipity, every decision leading to this destiny, every failure leading to this fate.

Yes, he saw it.

He saw how the great game worked.

A game Rhett was suddenly certain was his to win.

After all, Benson hadn't been bluffing about pulling that trigger. The old coyote had truly been played out, was down to his last option, about to walk down a very dark path—a path that surely even a battle-hardened spook like Benson would rather not go down if there was a way out.

So let's give him a way out, Rhett decided.

Now Rhett sensed that the energy in the room had changed. Perhaps it was only in his mind, but that momentary flood of positivity seemed to have affected them all.

Which meant it was time to strike.

Not by raising his serpent-hood but by lowering his head in submission.

Benson might just be vulnerable enough to let Rhett take Kaiser's deal.

At least for long enough to get them all out of this house alive.

Get Benson and Kaiser into that death-trap of a car.

So Rhett turned to Benson now, gazed at the coyote and flashed a wolfish smile. “All right, John, you can shoot me in cold blood in front of everyone,” he said, holding his arms out in surrender. “Or you can let me take Kaiser’s deal. Yes, I’ll take Kaiser’s deal now. I know you’re ready to pull the trigger, so I’ll bend the knee and stand down. Everything from our shared past is out in the open. None of us are clean, so we can all be certain none of this gets to Robinson. And despite that gun in your hand and that crazy look in your eye, nobody’s passed the point of no return yet. So I’ll take Kaiser’s deal and stand down. Resign from the CIA. Fade away into the shadows.”

Rhett held the smile, held the pose, held on to that feeling of being plugged into the flow of events, synchronized with the spin of space, floating on the tides of time. He understood now that the secret of control was to let go, to let it play out as each player made their choices.

Had Diego chosen to show up tonight, Rhett wondered as he watched Benson’s silver eyes narrow like the old coyote

was considering his own next move, deciding whether to pull the trigger or take the bait, blow Rhett's brains out or stand back and wait.

Rhett waited for Benson to respond, knowing that if Diego had come through, the game-board was lined up just right. Kaiser and Benson would be dead in minutes, and Rhett would be the last man standing.

Except there might be another man standing in the way, Rhett suddenly realized when Ice Wagner took a step forward, his green eyes narrowed to slits.

“You can't seriously be considering an offer, Benson,” Ice snarled across the room, his deadly gaze flicking back and forth between Rhett and Benson, his body still positioned in front of Indy. “Rhett Rodgers doesn't get to walk away from this. That isn't justice.”

Benson shifted on his feet, lowering his weapon and shaking his head at Ice. “CIA isn't in the justice business, kid.” He shot a hard look at Rhett. “You resign tonight, right after this meeting, in writing to Kaiser, with a copy to Senator Robinson.”

“What the fuck are you doing, Benson?” Ice growled.

Benson took a slow breath, shook his head. “Kaiser wants it this way, and it just might work. Especially because Rhett knows I’m ready to put a bullet in his head and go down for it. You see it in me, don’t you, Rhett?”

Rhett nodded grimly, no doubt in his mind about that part. Benson’s intentions were authentic. The fear Rhett had felt was real.

But so was the confidence surging in Rhett now. He was so close to getting Benson and Kaiser where he wanted.

Now Indy chimed in. “Benson’s right, Ice. If Rhett resigns from the CIA, he’s out of the game, out of the running for the next CIA Director. Nobody who resigns from the CIA gets back in, so it’s a one-way ticket once Rhett signs his name to it.”

Benson nodded. “With Rhett gone clean and quiet, Robinson will stick with Kaiser as Director. I’ll distance myself from Kaiser until the election. And Darkwater will live to fight another day. Another mission.” Benson moved past Rhett now, gun lowered but still drawn. “This mission is done, Ice. You and Indy made it through. So long as Rhett keeps his word and resigns, I have to accept it. I don’t trust the snake to not take another shot at revenge, but if he does we’ll be ready

and waiting. And without the protection and perks of the CIA, Rhett is exposed and vulnerable out there on his own. It won't be easy for him to hit back at us without all his CIA-level access. Kaiser and I have a running list of enemies. We'll just add Rhett to that list, keep the snake in our sights." He sighed, rubbed his eyes, shrugged. "Logic says this is the right call for now. Everything stays in the shadows, the CIA way. After all, it's not like any of us come out smelling like roses if all this gets to Robinson and the Senate Intelligence Committee." He flashed a grin. "Besides, I'd rather be a clown in the Darkwater circus than a washed-up coyote in a cage. Come on, it's over, kid. We won."

Indy flashed a smile, but Ice wasn't amused. Rhett watched the Delta's eyes carefully, wondering who the hell named this guy Ice when he seemed to be operating with a dangerously full head of steam.

Rhett's body tensed as Ice took a step in his direction, fists the size of cinderblocks clenched by his sides. This was bad, Rhett told himself as he saw Benson hesitate, like maybe the old coyote was reconsidering that deal, recalculating the plan.

What happens if Ice Wagner decides to take a swing, maybe even a shot, Rhett wondered as his pectorals flexed and

his triceps tightened.

Would Benson stand back and let Ice kill Rhett?

And would Benson let Ice take the fall for it?

Sacrifice his Darkwater man for the greater good?

That's what Rhett would do.

Surely Benson was tempted.

Was he going to push Ice forward or pull him back?

“He’s not going to fall for it, Ice,” said Benson, swiping at the air to defuse the crackling tension. “Relax, kid. Rhett’s not going to get provoked. We danced that dance already. He won’t snap and give you an excuse.”

“I don’t need a damn excuse. And the only thing that’s going to snap is his fucking neck,” growled Ice, clenching his fists hard enough that his knuckles cracked like gunshots.

Indy’s eyes flashed with fear, like she understood this wasn’t a provocation, was dangerously real. She stepped close to Wagner and grabbed his arm, leaning into him and whispering urgently.

“Ice, what are you doing?” she hissed under her breath, just loud enough for Rhett to hear. “This isn’t like you at all.

Please. I'm all right with whatever Benson and Kaiser are offering him. This can end without anyone else getting killed. Rhett doesn't need to *die*, Ice. I'm at peace with everything that happened. You *know* I am. What's wrong with you, Ice. This is so out of character for you. I don't ... I just don't ... I don't understand, Ice."

Rhett didn't hear the rest of Indy's words because his head was buzzing with adrenaline. He could see the fuse burning short in Ice's fire-hot eyes, and now Rhett understood it, saw the soldier's dangerous shadow the same way he'd seen his own shadow.

Yes, this wild uncontrollable rage was Ice's shadow, Rhett realized. The guy was a Delta, which meant years of discipline and training, control in the midst of chaos, coolness in the heat of battle. All of that training was designed to repress the impulsive recklessness that got aggressive young men killed.

And a man's shadow contained whatever he pushed away from the light.

That's why Ice's hot rage looked "out of character" as it emerged from where it had been repressed in his shadow. After all, a guy nicknamed Ice must have been the picture of

coolness under fire, poise under pressure, composure when everyone else was coming apart.

Except now Ice was coming part as that long-suppressed wildness showed in his eyes, the clearest expression of a dangerous man's shadow that Rhett had seen in three decades of being a shadow-warrior.

Rhett took a step back now, feeling the fear rise up his back when he noticed Benson's eyes flash like the old coyote saw it too, understood that everything about this game was bringing shadows into sight, darkness into the light.

Rhett began to panic inside now. Benson could end the game simply by giving Ice the go-ahead, unleashing that barely restrained out-of-control beast who was itching to avenge his woman, to seek the justice of the jungle, settle the score the old-fashioned way.

The man's way.

Benson was obviously going to do it, Rhett thought as the dread drained the blood from his face. It would be so easy. All Benson had to do was nod his head, say the word, let Ice attack. Rhett would fight, but he wasn't going to win against a trained Delta killer. And Rhett couldn't dare draw his own



weapon, because that would just give Benson an excuse for a justified kill, end the game even faster.

I'd do it if I were Benson, Rhett thought as he braced himself. And he'll do it because in the end Benson isn't so different from me. He's a snake like the rest of us, maybe worse. Letting his action-hero Delta lose control gives Benson a better ending to the game, final and decisive. It's the obvious choice, the only choice.

Benson made his choice.

“Give me your gun, Ice,” Benson said, his voice crackling with authority, his eyes blazing silver with decisiveness. “Trust me, kid. I understand how you feel, but this isn't the way. I was prepared to do it myself, but I'm not prepared to let you do it. Hand over the weapon, then tell your brother we're leaving, party's over. Come on, kid. You have a woman to think about now.”

Rhett blinked rapidly, exhilarated surprise rushing in when he realized Benson had just passed up a chance to finish this for good, finish Rhett while coming away clean. It might have even saved Benson and Kaiser's own asses, because if Diego saw that Rhett was dead, he might have decided not to blow the car and expose himself. Shit, Benson had the entire game

for the taking. All he had to do was let an expendable action-figure soldier take the fall. But he couldn't do it, the soft-hearted sentimental old fool couldn't fucking do it.

Benson you toothless dumb shit, Rhett thought contemptuously even as relief washed through him when he saw Ice swallow thickly, reach into his cargo flap, pull out a Sig Sauer 9mm, hand it barrel-down to Benson. You had your chance and you blew it.

Now you and old man Kaiser are going to blow sky-high.

If you can't make the hard decisions, you can't expect to win this sort of game.

You don't *deserve* to win this sort of game.

Rhett watched in stoic silence as Indy collapsed into Ice's arms, buried her face into his chest. She clearly understood what a close call this had been.

Ice made his way to the stairs now, Indy still wrapped around him. "Get your ass down here, Jack," he called. "We're leaving."

Heavy footsteps sounded above them. Moments later Jack was stomping down the stairs, Kaiser behind him.

Fist-bumps between the brothers, a quick introduction of Indy, hushed conversation between Benson and Kaiser.

Then they were all walking out the front door, Rhett ordered out first, followed by Benson, then Ice and Indy, with Jack and Kaiser bringing up the rear.

The group gathered on the sidewalk. Rhett glanced at Benson's car, then took a step back, gesturing with his head towards his Chevy Suburban on the next block. "I'll head home and grab my CIA-issued tech gear, turn it in to Langley later tonight," he said, injecting a good dose of sullen grumpiness in his voice. "You'll have my resignation letter within the hour, Martin." He forced a rueful grin, stuck out his right hand. "Well played, Martin. And good luck."

Kaiser glanced at Rhett, looked down at his hand, didn't shake it. He waited silently for Rhett to begin walking to his Suburban, then said something to Indy that made Rhett hesitate.

"Why don't you ride back to Langley with us, Ms. O'Donnell," Kaiser was saying. "You're still a CIA employee, and I'd like to debrief you while everything is fresh in your mind."

“Negative,” came Ice’s interjection. “I’m taking her to the hospital for a brain MRI.”

“You hit your head on something?” Benson sounded concerned.

Rhett slowed his walk down to a crawl as the back-and-forth continued behind him.

Then Rhett stopped when he heard Indy insist she was all right, that she’d rather get the debrief over and done with ASAP, that she’d ride with Benson and Kaiser to Langley.

In Benson’s car.

“All right,” came Ice’s reluctant agreement. “Jack and I will follow Benson’s car in the Jeep.”

“Great,” came Benson’s voice. “Saddle up, you sad clowns. Let’s take this circus to Kaiser’s big-top.”

Mild laughter rippled through the night air as panic ripped up Rhett’s spine.

He heard Benson’s key-fob go *chirp-chirp*.

The door-locks slid open *click-click*.

It was the moment of truth.

All Rhett had to do was turn around and say something.

It would save his daughter, but it would bury him.

The deal would be off. They'd find the explosives. Rhett would go down for attempted murder of the CIA Director.

He could feel fate watching.

He could sense destiny listening.

The wheel was in spin.

The choice was Rhett's to make.

Good or bad?

Demon or dad?

He'd chosen to kill his daughter twice already.

Would choosing to save her once redeem him?

He stood there for a long moment.

Then he made his choice.

He kept walking.

Ice watched Rhett walk away.

Walk away after briefly stopping, hesitating, pausing like he was in two minds, trying to decide whether to keep going or turn back.

He was choosing, Ice suddenly realized as he turned his attention from Rhett to Benson and Kaiser and Indy reaching for the door-handles of Benson's boat-sized Crown Victoria, dark like a hearse, silent like a coffin.

Now time slowed down for Ice, his vision narrowing then expanding out to where he was taking in everything, every angle, every avenue, every splinter of shadow, every glint of light.

And he saw it.

The telltale glint of light from the rooftop of an apartment building.

Someone was up there.

Looking down through a scope.

And suddenly it all came together for Ice.

It came together in a blinding flash of raging desperate reckless wild out-of-control protective panic.

“Get away from the car!” he roared, breaking into a dead run from where he and Jack were already halfway down the block. “Get the fuck away from that car!”

Ice’s vision went black as his boots pounded the pavement, his legs pumping like pistons, hands slicing through the air as he called up every ounce of energy, every shred of strength, every hour of training, every splinter of sinew, every fiber of muscle.

Now his dark vision exploded into firelight, and Ice launched himself from impossibly far away, stretching his body past the breaking point as the car exploded in a ball of hot red flame.

He roared as shattered glass and splintered steel cut into his flesh as he put his outstretched body between Indy and the car, turning in the air to take the shrapnel in his back not his face, his momentum knocking Indy into the grass on the Senator’s front lawn.

He landed on her, spreading his arms and legs out wide to brace his fall so he wouldn’t crush her. Behind him he could

feel the heat of the burning car, hear Kaiser and Benson shouting in agony.

His back was ripped to shreds from seething-hot steel and razor-sharp glass, but Ice didn't give a fuck, didn't give a damn, would give up his own life and everyone else's to save hers, to make sure Indy knew she'd never be vulnerable to violence so long as Ice was still alive, so long as Ice was still breathing, so long as Ice was still a man.

Her man.

Now through his blood-red vision Ice saw her face, eyes wide and wild, hair singed and smoking, breath frantic with panic, chest heaving with shock.

But she was alive, Ice thought with desperate relief as he scanned her with battle-trained quickness, saw that she was bleeding slightly but only from being scraped as she fell, not from the shrapnel, most of which seemed to be burning holes in the torn flesh of Ice's back.

He pushed himself off Indy now, leaping to his feet, whipping out his knife, standing over her huddled body, prepared to take a sniper's bullet, ready to rout an army of oncoming assassins.



But there was no rifle crack, no marauding mercenaries, no more glints of glass on that rooftop, no more explosions in the street.

Ice shook his head to get the ringing out of his ears, saw Jack pulling a groaning gasping bleeding Benson away from the flaming wreck, saw Kaiser crawling on hands and knees in the street, blood dribbling from his ears.

“Fuck!” Ice shouted, about to go help Kaiser but Indy had beaten him to the punch. Ice tried to grab her shoulder, but she was too quick, was already by Kaiser’s side, was getting him to lie on his back a safe distance from the burning shell of the car.

Indy glanced up from Kaiser’s writhing body, her eyes narrowed to slits, the anger of that raging infant coming to the forefront now, sending a clear message to her man, to her protector, to her fucking avenger.

“Go,” she said to him. “Jack and I have got this. Go, Ice. Go now. Do it. Fucking *do* it, you hear me?”

Ice met her gaze for one long dark beautiful moment as their shadows connected in the flaming night. Then he whipped his body around and exploded like he’d been shot from a cannon.

The burning shrapnel in his back was fuel now, urging him on as he saw Rhett get to the Chevy Suburban, whip open the front door, hide behind it and aim a black Glock 17 handgun at Ice.

The gun spat yellow flame as Ice thundered towards Rhett. For the life of him Ice couldn't tell if he'd been hit or not. All he knew was that he was still running, and that was enough for now.

Rhett fired again as Ice launched himself shoulder-first at the open car door, slamming it against Rhett's body, cracking the bone in Rhett's forearm between the door and the frame.

The gun fell to the asphalt near Ice's feet, but he didn't bother to pick it up. Instead he smashed his right fist into Rhett's face, felt his knuckles crack bone and crush cartilage, hot blood from Rhett's shattered nose and broken teeth spraying Ice's hand before spilling onto the dark road.

Ice grabbed Rhett by the back of his hair now, pulled him away from the truck, spun him around three times and then let go, sending him spinning onto the sidewalk, stumbling into the grass.

And then Ice was on him, slamming fist after fist into Rhett's face with wild rage that seemed to come from some

beast that had been hiding within him for years, perhaps lifetimes.

Rhett's face was a bloody bulbous pulp when Ice dragged him to his feet again, hurled him face-first into the side of the truck, then ripped out his knife and stuck the blade into Rhett's lower back, stabbing viciously three times into his left kidney, twice more into the right, then staggering back as Rhett crumpled to the ground like a sack of empty clothes.

Black blood oozed from the fatal wounds like demonic stigmata, surreal and sickly, slow and sticky.

Time slowed as Ice watched Rhett die.

And then suddenly the fight was over, and the adrenaline began to drain from Ice, the pain of the fire-hot shrapnel burning like acid in his flesh, his vision starting to blur as he staggered back to the scene.

All Ice's senses went in and out as sirens wailed closer and louder, engines roaring around him, tires squealing as a herd of black Chevy Suburbans thundered onto the scene even as ambulances bounced over the curbs towards the wreck.

In a daze Ice saw paramedics lifting Kaiser and Benson onto stretchers, loading them into separate ambulances as Indy

screamed and pointed in Ice's direction as she ran to him.

Ice could see her lips move, hear the sound of her voice.

But he couldn't understand what she was saying.

Now he felt a throbbing pain above his right pectoral and he realized that yeah, maybe he'd been shot after all. Imagine that.

"Fuck," he muttered, stumbling and then going down to his knees as Indy tore down the burning streets towards him, getting there just in time to cushion his head before he fell face-first into the asphalt.

Vision went in and out in splinters as Ice felt himself being lifted by many arms. He grinned dreamily, wondering if it was angels laying hands upon his broken body. The grin widened when he thought he saw his smiling parents directing those angels.

But then he immediately lost the grin as panic ripped through him at the prospect he might be dead.

It vaguely occurred to him that if he were dead and still conscious, then it meant the spirit lived on, the afterlife was real, death was just an illusion.

Fuck that, Ice thought as he clawed his way back to the world of burning flesh and screaming pain. The afterlife could wait. He wanted *this* damn life.

A life with her.

“I’m going with him,” came her voice, alive and loud, furious and forceful. “I’m here, Ice. I’m here with you. Hey, is somebody going to drive this fucking ambulance or do I have to do it myself?”

Ice grinned up at her now, blinked away that looming afterlife, told his grinning parents they’d have to wait a long time to say “told you so” to his dead ass.

They’d have to wait forever.

Because his ass was staying right here.

Right here with her.

Forever here with her.

## EPILOGUE

### **THREE DAYS LATER.**

### **NAVAL HOSPITAL.**

### **BETHESDA, MARYLAND.**

“Take a right past the ER and it’s the first room on your left. We had to move them.” The primly uniformed Navy nurse smiled reassuringly as panic streaked across Indy’s face. “Oh, no, nothing like that. There’ve been no setbacks after the surgeries. They just wanted more space for ... well, you’ll see. Go right in, Ms. O’Donnell.”

Indy exhaled, returned the smile, then hurried past the Emergency Room, where she’d spent nine anxious hours the first night watching from a distance as nurses and doctors worked feverishly to first remove the bullet from Ice’s chest, then go to work on tracking down every bit of shrapnel from all three men’s bodies, racing against time to extract all foreign objects and closing up the wounds before life-threatening infection set in.

Indy herself had been treated for shock and minor burns and a few cuts and scrapes. Her ears were still ringing, but she'd gotten the all-clear after finally taking the brain MRI that Ice insisted on even as they worked to patch his broken, torn body back up.

Indy had stayed up for two days straight as the doctors monitored Ice and Benson and Kaiser for any signs of shock or internal infection. After getting the all-clear at the 48-hour mark, Indy had collapsed in an empty room in the sprawling Naval Hospital, the same place they'd taken JFK after Dallas.

She'd slept deep and hard, awakening refreshed but anxious to get to Ice. So when she hurried to his room and found it empty, she'd started to panic before the nurse told her they'd all been moved around the corner.

Now Indy turned the corner, pushed through the first door on her left, then stopped abruptly and gasped at the scene inside.

It was a damn circus in here.

The room was the size of a football field. They'd opened up some movable walls to create a large space big enough for three full-sized hospital beds and at least as many long tables, every spot of which was occupied by CIA and Darkwater men

and women squinting at laptops or barking into cell phones or having mini-conferences about some part of whatever grand plan was unfolding.

Indy stood shellshocked for a long moment, taking in the sheer insanity of what appeared to be a fully-staffed CIA-Darkwater war-room.

At the center of which were Kaiser, Benson, and Ice.

Each of them reclining propped up in their hospital beds.

“Hey,” Indy said, hurrying over to Ice’s side, smiling as he pulled her in for a kiss. “How are you feeling?” She glanced at the dressing on his chest. It was new and significantly smaller and less bloody than the last one. “You’re lying on your back now. So all the cuts are healing? No leftover shrapnel?”

Ice swiped away her questions. She could tell he was still embarrassed for passing out in the street. She wanted to roll her eyes and tell him to get over his manly-man ego, but she decided to let her man hold on to his macho frame while he was still forced to use a bedpan.

“There you are,” came Benson’s voice from the bed behind her. “Indy, I want you to meet Nancy Sullivan.”



Indy turned to see a pretty fifty-something redhead with blue eyes the color of a summer sky. “Nice to meet you, Nancy. Are you ... are you part of Darkwater?”

“Yes,” said Benson impishly.

“No,” said Nancy at exactly the same time, their voices drowning out each other. She sighed, shook her head, then rolled her eyes towards Benson while flashing an exasperated smile at Indy. “It’s complicated. I left Darkwater, but now I’m going to help out for a bit until John gets back on his feet.”

“It’s not that complicated at all,” said Benson. “You left and now you’re back. Simple as sunshine. Stop being such a grump, Nancy. You want some morphine? Hey, nurse, can we get this redhead jacked up on some morphine, please.”

Indy giggled, then glanced past Benson to where Kaiser was having a hushed conversation with Bill Morris, the CIA’s Deputy Director. She waited until they finished up, then made her way over there just as a sharp-eyed, spectacled woman with thick white hair and an infant in each arm arrived at Kaiser’s bedside.

“I’m Alice Kaiser,” said the sharp-eyed woman with the infants, a boy and a girl who appeared to be fraternal twins, cute as buttons and twice as perfect. Alice smiled down at her

babies. “This is Adam with the big grin. And the shy one burrowing into my boob is Eve.”

Benson’s coyote-yipping laugh rang out from the next bed. “All right, you two can never again give me crap for insisting that names have power. Adam and Eve? Really, Martin? Seriously, Alice? You don’t think that’s a bit pompous? And you say I’m the one trying to play God.”

Alice turned her sharp-eyed gaze in Benson’s direction. She raised an eyebrow, then leaned towards Indy, depositing the twins into her arms. “Hold them a minute, will you?” Alice strode over to Benson, adjusting her spectacles as she scanned the maze of bandages and tape over his cuts and burns. Then she selected a choice wound, smiled sweetly, and poked it sharply with her pinky finger, making Benson howl in protest. Satisfied, Alice retrieved her children, kissed her husband briskly on the cheek, then nodded at Indy and hurried to the door like she had someplace to be and not enough time to get there.

“I’ve never seen her so happy, Martin,” Benson grumbled with a sideways glance at Kaiser. “Usually she threatens to slit my throat with her nail-file for pulling you into another Darkwater mess. She must finally be warming up to me after

forty years.” He frowned at his tender wound, winked at Indy, then gestured for her to sit on a chair between his and Ice’s beds so the three of them could talk quietly. “Last night we confirmed that it was Diego Vargas who planted the explosives for Rhett. We’ve launched a full-scale manhunt. Traffic-cam footage, satellite images, facial recognition from CCTV feeds all over the east coast. We’ll find him.”

Indy nodded, scanning the men and women in the room. “Are any of these folks FBI?”

Benson snorted. “Why would we bring the FBI in on this? They’re good, but they’ve got all these ... rules.”

Indy sighed. “You mean rules like in the Bill of Rights?” She rolled her eyes, sighed again, then got serious. “Did you identify Diego from traffic-cam footage at the scene outside the Senator’s home?”

Benson shook his head. “It was too dark. We got confirmation from the hostages.”

Indy frowned. “OK. Um ... what hostages?”

“The ones we found locked in Rhett’s basement,” Benson said cheerfully. “A woman and her daughter. Mercy and Cari.

It's a long story, but they confirmed that Rhett kidnapped them to blackmail Diego into planting that explosive."

Indy blinked rapidly, frowning as her sharp mind pieced it together. "Diego exposed himself to save them? Are they *his* wife and daughter?"

Benson shook his head. "Apparently they barely knew him. Didn't even know his name was Diego until Rhett told them."

"Strange." Indy brushed a strand of hair from her face. She glanced at Ice, who'd reached out his hand for hers. She held his hand, smiled when he squeezed, did her best to hide her rising anxiety about what was going to happen to Ice for killing Rhett in the street. She didn't want to ask in front of everyone, but now that Ice was out of the ER and on the mend, Indy couldn't help but worry.

Benson seemed to sense her worry. He smiled as he pressed the lever that raised the back of his bed until he was seated almost upright. "You don't need to worry about what happened outside the Senator's home. Ice is clear. Kaiser took care of it. That's what he and Bill Morris were whispering about just now. The final report has been filed." Benson took a breath, shrugged it out, his eyes shining. "Rhett Rodgers was

accidentally killed in the explosion. That's how it's been written up. All traffic-cam footage from that night has been destroyed. Mercy and Cari are under temporary protection in a CIA safe-house. Their statements are sealed, not part of the official record. Not even Senator Robinson knows what really happened. Official report says the explosives were planted in the storm drain beneath the car, intended for the Senator when he got back to town. Report says it accidentally went off early when my car somehow triggered the charge. Plausible enough to be believable. That's all there is to it. The file on Rhett Rodgers has been officially closed and sealed. He's already been cremated, so there'll never be an autopsy. It's over, Indy. You and Ice are safe to ride off into your sunset."

Ice grunted. "It'll be a while before I'm riding anything without a cushion under my pock-marked shrapnel-torn butt."

Indy smiled, tried to laugh, but there was a tightness in her throat that stopped the celebration, a melancholy in her heart that signaled something unresolved, something unsettled.

"He loved you, Indy," said Benson quietly, startling her enough that she jerked her head in his direction. "In his own way, he loved you. To the extent that it was possible for him, he loved you."

“What?” she said. “Who loved me?”

Benson smiled gently, his eyes softening to a soothing gray. “Ice told me Rhett hesitated before walking away. That’s how Ice knew something was wrong. That’s what saved your life, Indy. Saved all our lives.”

Indy shook her head, tried to blink away the confusion. “He hesitated for one measly second before deciding to let me die for the third time in one lifetime? That means he loved me?”

Benson nodded. “Rhett spent his whole life in the shadows. Alone in the shadows. Yes, he was naturally wired a certain way. But he was also trained to make ruthlessly self-preserving decisions. An NOC operator needs to have a heart of cold stone. They need to literally be capable of murdering someone they love if it’s part of the mission. Rhett had something cold and deadly wired into his being. But the CIA also had a hand in creating this man, in taking away his humanity to serve a purpose. NOC training specifically pushes normal human emotions like compassion and love into the psyche’s shadow, burying it deep enough that it can’t compromise the mission. The fact that Rhett actually hesitated enough to stop and think about it before walking away isn’t

trivial, Indy. It's deeply meaningful. It means some part of the love and compassion that was once lost to Rhett's shadow found its way back at the end. Found its way back because of you. That part of him was still human at the end. That part of him was still your father, Indy." He shrugged. "It's hard to reconcile, but it's the truth. Nobody is all good or all evil. Nobody is all saint or all sinner. We're all composites, a mix-and-match grab-bag of impulses and experiences, training and trauma. Rhett was a murderous sonofabitch who belongs in hell. But he also served his country, used his dark talents just like your mother Scarlet used hers to do what nobody likes to admit needs to be done. It takes the full spectrum of dark and light to drag America to its destiny. Rhett and Scarlet deserved to die. But they also deserve to be remembered. Kaiser has commissioned two new anonymous stars on the wall at CIA headquarters." He glanced knowingly at Indy. "And someday, when you run your fingertips over those nameless stars carved into white granite, you might feel a stab of unnamable emotion somewhere deep in the recesses of your shadow. That feeling will be pride for your mother and father, Indy. I know it's hard to hold conflicting emotions in your heart at the same time, but that's something you'll have to learn to live with when it comes to the memory of your parents. Someday you'll find

your way to that place where you can be both angry and proud.” He shrugged, tried to flash his coyote smile but couldn’t quite pull it off. “Anyway, that’s all I have to say. What you do with all that is up to you, kid.” He shot a glance at Ice. “Up to the two of you.”

Indy stared dumbly at Benson, not sure what to say, not sure what to feel.

Then she looked into Ice’s eyes, and she knew exactly what to feel.

“Are we really free to ride off into the sunset, Ice?” she whispered as someone with a laptop diverted Benson’s attention, giving them a strange moment of privacy because the room was so chaotic that they simply disappeared into the background, dissolved into the clouds, sank beneath the waves. “What does that mean for us? What comes next?”

Ice pulled her up off the chair, dragged her into his oversized hospital bed despite her protests. He cuddled her close, then pointed out a muscular bearded man grinning as he whispered something to an olive-skinned woman with curves that went on for days.

“That’s Ax with his wife Amy,” said Ice. He gestured to a big clean-shaved monster with spiky blond hair and tattoos



snaking out the top of his crew-necked shirt. “That’s Bruiser with his wife Brenna, who happens to be Nancy Sullivan’s daughter. Over there with his arms crossed over his big chest is Cody. He’s from Texas. That’s his woman Cate. She’s Italian by way of the Colombian drug cartels.”

“Hold on a second, what does that even—”

“Don’t interrupt,” said Ice with a grin, drawing her attention to a stunning black woman who just walked into the room. Of course, Ice didn’t really need to draw Indy’s attention to the woman because every head turned to see the movie star Diana Jackson, who just happened to be Darkwater SEAL Dogg’s dearly beloved.

And soon Indy was snuggled into her man’s big warm body, listening like a child being told a fairytale as Ice whispered the magical mystical names in order, two at a time, going down the line from Dogg and Diana to Edge and Emma, past Fox and Fay to Gale and Gavin, hitting Hogan and Hannah and then stopping abruptly and looking into Indy’s dark shadowy eyes with his Ice-cool gaze.

“Now do you see what comes next, Indy?” he whispered as the room buzzed with energy and the world spun in delight.

“*We* come next. Indy and Ice. You and I.”

Indy nodded against his body, smiled against his skin, kissed his rough lips, snuggled his scratchy stubble. They lay together in happy silence as Indy let everything sink in. Then she saw Jack Wagner notice them and start to walk over, and something occurred to her.

“Wait, that’s not right,” she whispered. “We were next at the start of this mission. But now it’s the end of this mission, so we’re no longer next, right? And that means ...”

Ice sighed as Jack swaggered up, wolfish grin plastered all over his face. “Hey Jack, Indy says you’re next.”

Jack frowned, then the grin broke wide again and he shook his head like a wolf in a waterfall. “Hey, you know I love this thing Benson’s got going with the names. But you also know that this always-and-forever crap is not my jam. Don’t get me wrong. You guys look great together. So do the other couples. But I’m not that kind of operator. Hell, I’ve told girls I love them without even knowing their names. All respect to the grand wizard John Benson, but I’m going to be the asshole who breaks his lucky streak.”

Indy giggled, then smiled as Jack winked at her, bumped fists with his big brother, then swaggered away, leaning close to an elderly nurse and whispering something that made her

blush as he walked out the door to meet whatever was coming next, coming next for him.

Perhaps coming next for them all.

The entire Darkwater circus of clowns and caravans, acrobats and contortionists, motley colors and spiral rainbows, deadly men and vital women, twists and turns, bullets and burns, stars like white diamonds, clouds like black shrouds, coyotes and snakes, ladies and rakes, the flower and the gun, the moon and the sun, the eagle and the dove, the violence and the love, the power and the glory, the Darkwater kind of story.

The story of man and woman.

The story of love.

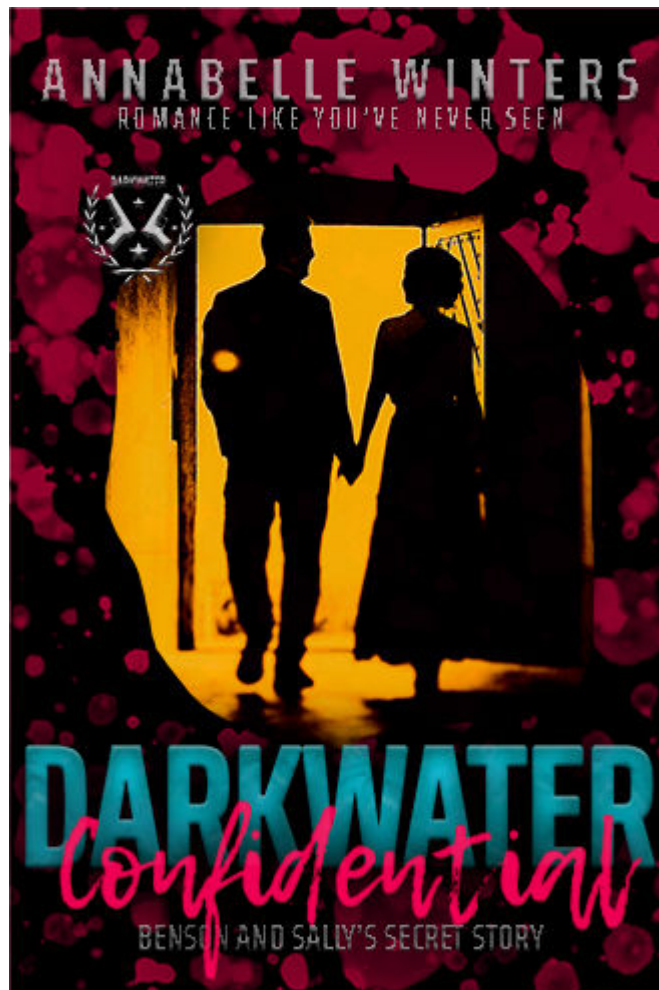
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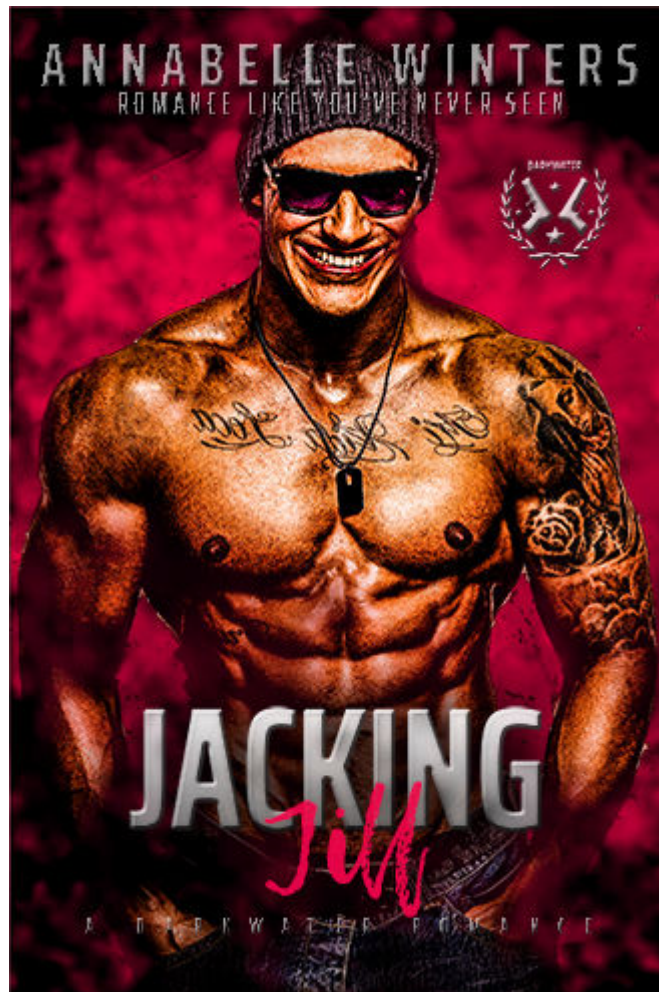
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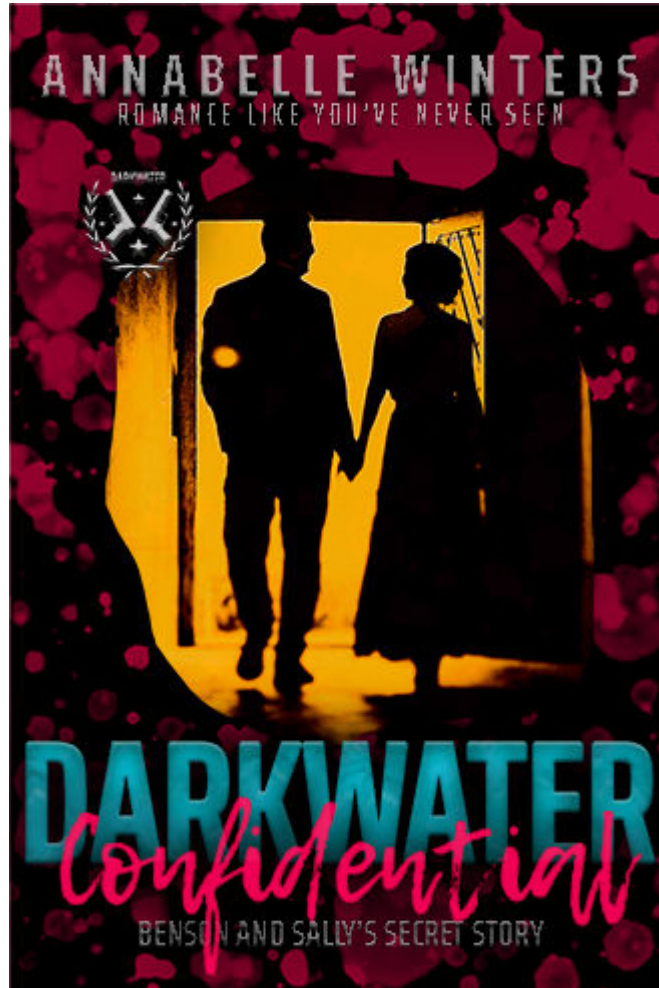


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Benson first showed up all the way back in 2016 in **[Hostage for the Sheikh](#)**. Since then Benson has drifted in and out of the shadows in several more Sheikh books and also my shifter novel **[Curves for the Dragon](#)**. And, of course, you need to read **[Darkwater Confidential: Benson and Sally's Secret Story](#)** immediately.

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