



BOOK TWENTY

BLITZ

ZOE DAWSON

Out of nowhere.

BLITZ

SEAL TEAM ALPHA
BOOK 20

ZOE DAWSON



Blitz

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Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.

Neale Donald Walsch

SQUAD GLOSSARY

Ruckus's Squad – Tier 2 Operators Books 1-8

Lieutenant Ruckus “Bowie” Cooper
Ashe “Kid Chaos” Wilder
Wes “Cowboy” McGraw
Thorn “Tank” Hunt – MWDs: Echo and Bronte
Ocean “Blue” Beckett
Arlo “Scarecrow” Porter
Orion “Wicked” Cross
Jude “Hollywood” Lock

Fast Lane's Squad Books 9-16

Ryuu “Dragon” Shannon
Errol “Pitbull” Ballentine
Atticus “Hemingway” Sinclair
Max “Mad Max” Keegan – MWD: Juggernaut, (Jugs)
Oliver “Artful Dodger” Graham
Neo “2-Stroke” Teller
Zach “Saint” Bartholomew
Lieutenant Ford “Fast Lane” Nixon

Rock's Squad
Books 17-24

Lieutenant Adrian "Rock" Lane (Previous CO)
Milo "Professor" Prescott
Lieutenant Elias "Joker" Jackman (Current CO)
Zephirin "Gator" LaBauve
Callen "Blitz" Berenger
Andrew (Drew) "D-Day" Nolan
Mateo "Zorro" Martinez
Sam "Buck" Buckard
Dakota "Bear" Locklear – MWD: Flint

Iceman's Squad – Tier 1 Operators
Books 1-8

Master Chief Christopher (Kit) "Iceman" Snow
Boyce "Preacher" Carmichael
Remington "GQ" Nash
Jayesh "Kodiak" Lyta
Archer "Hazard" Booth
Cooper (Skully) "Skull" Sullivan – MWD: Bonesaw (Bones)
Carter "Boomer" Findley
Kelly "Breakneck" Gatlin

Tex's Squad - Covert Operators
Books 1-8

Lieutenant Michael "Tex" Penn
Angelo "Bondo" Zane
Matthew "Easy" Hitchcock
Bale "Shark" Maddox
Shane "Twister" Reeves
Kade "Dagger" Hollis
Christian "Brawler" Beckett - MWD: Beast
Jae "Flash" Shaw

To all those with a conscience who stand up for what they believe in.

THE OUTSKIRTS of an Abandoned Yoruba Village, Niger, Africa

Navy SEAL, Callen “Blitz” Berenger, scanned the village in front of his team, flat on his stomach, the sweltering heat registered as a green haze in his night vision goggles. They had been sent here off a tip from a local and some solid intel from the CIA that the group they were hunting, *Almawquif Almuahad Lil’islam* or AAL, was recruiting in this area. At the beginning, most of the members were Tuareg clansmen who had banded with their Libyan counterpart, Path of Enlightenment, *Tariq Altanwir*, or TA, but the ranks had swelled with many Nigerien members since the collapse of the Libyan state.

There had been numerous attacks led by Teboho Achebe, the anointed leader of AAL, assuming the crown of le *grand croyant*—the grand believer and his Russian counterpart, Anya Olenska, the daughter of Leonid Olenska, Russian oligarch and rumored to be the mastermind of the operation to murder United States Ambassador David Ogden, his wife Serena and their daughters. It was also discovered but not confirmed that Leonid was the ex-facto leader of a splinter group, Z Militia.

Achebe and his Russian counterparts were now the most wanted terrorists by the United States and the United Kingdom. Achebe and Olenska had killed six MI6 agents to get his daughter Ayo back, pissing off the Brits.

They had been running and gunning for seven days of continuous ops, but their taskmaster with the go-ahead from the ambassador, Katherine “Kat” Cross was amped for this mission, and they fed off that energy. Mission planning and prep had become like reflex—run the scenarios, recon the area,

gear up, get in, and do the job necessary whether that was clear buildings or face the enemy head-on with no margin for error.

Ever since Teboho Achebe had escaped the custody of the Koutoukalé Prison and the US government, he'd been going strong across Niger. The United States still had an arrest warrant out for him and Anya. Leonid was another kettle of fish. Since there was still no proof of his involvement, they were holding back on charging him. The man had the wealth to disappear, and the US was playing their cards close to the vest before revealing their hand.

Their new ambassador, Isabelle Theriot, now engaged to Zephirin "Gator" LaBauve, his teammate, was spearheading the operations. There was still something interesting about her past that Gator was keeping to himself, but Blitz believed that was his prerogative. It didn't have to do with team security as far as Blitz knew because Gator would never put the team at risk.

Embedded with Blitz's team were Lieutenant Elias "Joker" Jackman, their CO, Milo "Professor" Prescott, Sam "Buck" Buckard, Andrew "D-Day" Nolan, Mateo "Zorro" Martinez, Dakota "Bear" Locklear, and their military working dog, a black-as-pitch Belgian Malinois by the name of Flint, MI6 operator Lester Webb, a former SAS badass special operator, and the FBI Fly Team, agents Huxley, Zimmerman, Nguyn, Pierce, and the very determined and skilled Bree West.

His attention had to be focused on the mission at hand. Looking at Bree kitted out for the operation got under his skin in many ways.

She was a distraction for multiple reasons besides her professional attitude and honed observation skills. He glanced over at her focused expression, those never-miss-a-thing amber eyes in her oval face, those high elegant cheekbones, and that shredded body, thinking the same thing he'd thought when he'd first seen her a few weeks ago...fucking trouble. The kind of dick and mind shit he didn't need and continually refused to act on, no matter how strong the impulses were. He knew the difference, because only a few months ago, he'd been involved with Geneve Bonnet, CEO of H20mni, attendant at the G5 Sahel Conference. Geneve played on his body, but she never troubled his mind. She was fun to be with and a good fuck, but nothing more.

Bree was a totally different story.

To top it off, the success of this mission leaned heavily on his team. None of the embedded agents, except Webb, had ever been in combat. Well, except

for the ambush of Achebe, an isolated incident. This was no time to be preoccupied. Bree was a straight-up distraction both in the way she affected him on a personal level and in how his protective instincts were jamming him up all over the place.

If Blitz had his way, she wouldn't be here. None of the agents would. It was clear she knew how to use the M4 and her sidearm. She was a trained agent with assault experience, but combat was completely different. Blitz and his team had trained for every conceivable combat scenario and learned to adjust to real-world situations that no FBI instructor could ever have imagined. These agents were outside a wire they didn't know how to navigate and some of them might not even be aware they were in no-man's land.

She was a solid agent and so was her Fly Team. He had to put his faith in their performance thus far, but he couldn't help worrying about how he would keep her safe.

Intel said the village in the distance was harboring AAL members, and Achebe and Olenska had been sighted near here. The town had been abandoned a while ago with the constant expansion of the desert and the violence this far out as AAL expanded its territory. AAL feared the SEALs from the embassy after several defeats in the past. The terrorist group was leaving him and his team alone, but Blitz suspected that was going to be temporary. Even with the general populace angered by AAL's brutality, Achebe and Anya remained elusive, but there was chatter that she held Bree responsible for her brother Uri's death and there was going to be retribution. Anya would have to go through him and the whole team to get to Bree.

There was a sense of cautious security among the locals as he and his team executed op after op. The president was supportive of the efforts to rid the country of AAL. With the upcoming conference, it was imperative they eliminate the threat of this two-headed snake.

They were to clear the town and kill or capture Achebe and Olenska. The emphasis had been on capture to bring them back to the embassy for interrogation and process them back to the States for trial. The State Department wanted Anya Olenska alive to flip on her father, but Blitz was sure that woman would die before she would ever give the hated Americans anything to burn her dad.

Fuck, it's hot, Blitz thought. The temperature was always pretty elevated, around 120 degrees during the day, but it had jumped about ten degrees a few days before and just stayed there. Dead of night, and he was dripping wet.

This sweat bath added to days of sweat and left them all rank. If they didn't get to shower and rest soon, they wouldn't be able to stand each other.

Buck punctuated his feelings exactly, making them all chuckle with his cowboy wisdom. "It's hotter than making whoopee in woolens."

"Looks too quiet, LT," Professor said.

"Everyone should still be sleeping," Gator responded.

"There are guards," Bear said, the glow from his infrared readout on his wrist barely registered. He relayed how many Teams 1 and 4 would encounter.

"We split up as planned," Joker said. "We'll break into four groups, Team 1 on me. We're going east. Team 2 will take the southern approach. Team 3 west and Team 4 north. If we get squirts, we can head them off. Keep it as quiet as possible."

The town was laid out in one long line of homes from east to west made out of heat-absorbing rust-red adobe that kept the interiors cool, and with perimeter walls and courtyards. But all Blitz saw strategically were places to hide and ambush them.

Team 1 consisted of Joker, D-Day, and Huxley, Team 2 Blitz, West, and Webb, Team 3 Zorro, Nguyn, and Pierce, and Team 4 Buck, Zimmerman, Bear, and Flint. Gator and Professor would find rooftop access, giving them the high ground and overwatch.

Blitz's objective was smack dab in the middle of the village and head on from their current position. There was an open area to a perimeter fence they would have to climb over.

At Joker's "Execute," they all started moving forward, the dust from the desert coating his exposed skin. Team 1 and Team 3 went left toward the separate ends of the town. Team 3 would have to circle around to come in from the north and Team 4 went right.

Blitz stayed his course, leading Bree and Webb toward the fence. The night was pitch-black, but Blitz had no problem seeing through his night vision goggles, even with the heat fogging them up, the ground and village a grainy green. He looked to his right and left, as the Advanced Target Pointer on their guns danced around on the horizon. He knew exactly where his teammates were.

They moved slowly and stealthily, applying the same maxim they would use while clearing buildings: slow is smooth and smooth is fast.

The scenery changed from scrub and scarce patches of grass to the

structures that indicated they were entering the outskirts of the town.

When they hit the wall, Blitz didn't hesitate, jumped, caught the edge, and rolled his body at the top up and over to the ground below. He moved out to give Bree and Webb space to land, his gun trained on the courtyard and the house in front of them. Nothing moved.

"LT," Buck said through the comms. "Guards down." That meant the eastern part of the town had been neutralized of AAL security.

"Copy," Joker said. "Same here, over and out." Then there was silence.

Bree came over the wall as elegantly as she always moved. Her curves looked just as good through his NVGs. Then Webb landed. Without words, they marched to the house in the courtyard and stacked at the door.

Blitz tried the handle and it opened. Without waiting, Bree went past him and breached. Her stance was pure locked and loaded. She swept the room, then moved to her right and entered another room. Webb passed him as well and went left. Inside, the hot, stale air hit him, the smell of old body odor and cooked food lingering. He took a hit off his camelback and blocked out the heated misery.

"Clear," came her voice over the comm on the heels of Webb's.

They walked toward the front door and after a quick look out with their guns trained toward the street, they exited the house. A belligerent wave of desert heat hit him. With methodical precision, they cleared the houses, neutralizing AAL's members as they went. Bree kept security, while he and Webb used their knives on the sleeping terrorists, leaving glow sticks in their wake to show the house had been cleared.

After the last house in their designated area was finished, Blitz looked right and left up the street as those lasers from his teammates' guns got closer. Straight across from him, Zorro stepped out onto the street and nodded to him. The target house was a larger one with a striped awning that looked to be some type of food store, an endless patchwork of residences, narrow streets, and dark alleyways.

"Fuck, it's hot," Webb growled.

"Dry heat my ass," Bree murmured, and the corner of Blitz's mouth curved. Yeah, the people who had never been subjected to this country's climate would say that desert heat was dry. Those people were full of crap.

They merged into a nine-person-and-one-dog team and headed toward the striped awning as Buck and Webb peeled away, heading to the back of the house to catch anyone trying to escape.

Joker, D-Day, and Huxley were moving in from the west. They were all converging on the house with the awning. But Team 1 was still working on clearing. A SEAL's biggest advantage was surprise. They were all about kicking down doors and rolling up bad guys in the middle of the night, swift and deadly.

The front door opened, and a man walked out into the street. He looked a bit disoriented and stumbled after each couple of steps. They all froze. Blitz swore softly. They all knew the edict. The rules of engagement were clear. Hostile action or hostile intent were the only behaviors acceptable to kill a combatant.

But this guy had no weapon Blitz could see. Didn't mean he wasn't strapped, though. But it was clear he was sleepwalking. No one could make this shit up...sleepwalking. Fuck.

That's when the door opened again and a woman walked into the street, going after him. She touched his shoulder and said something in French. The guy turned with her as she guided him back toward the building. Then she looked to where Blitz and the eight people with him were standing exposed in the street. Her eyes widened as she looked directly at him. They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, then she shouted at the top of her lungs, waking the man who came out of his sleep trance.

From his belt, the sleepwalker grabbed a hidden handgun, and Blitz pulled off a shot, hitting him, spinning him around. The woman screeched bloody hell and threw herself at the body.

He heard Joker yell, "Contact!" Then all hell broke loose.

Blitz felt the heat of the first rounds come screaming down the street with the sound of a cracking whip. An AAL nosed out of concealment and delivered more lead as everyone moved to the side of the buildings for cover. He risked a glance at Bree, but she was on point, her face composed and focused as she moved with them.

"We're pinned down," Joker said over the comms. "Gator?"

"On it, LT." That's when bodies started to drop.

The enemy continued to fire down the street toward them. Zorro and Zimmerman crossed to get a better bead on the shooters. He sprinted down the other side of the street, Zimmerman picking up his field of fire with a steady fifty-round burst toward the building. The volume of automatic gunfire diminished as Blitz heard Buck and Webb breaching from the back door, the charge loud and unmistakable. Professor reached them. "Can't see

shit from that rooftop.”

They moved closer, leapfrogging toward the building while hugging the walls. Zorro and Zimmerman covering from another doorway enemy fire was chipping away at.

The target house had been at an intersection full of houses Team 1 hadn't yet cleared.

Out of the corner of Blitz's eye, kitty-corner to the target house, a door banged open, and a man and woman bolted into the shadows.

“Squirters!” Zorro called.

Bree blew by him, racing after the running figures. *Bree no!*

“Bear,” Blitz said, and he sprinted after them, rounds cracking all around him, Bear, and Flint.

As the gunfire receded into the background, he ran hard after Bree's back. The couple ducked into a house, and Bree unerringly headed in that direction. Flint had almost caught up to her.

“Huxley's hit! Zorro!” Joker's calm voice echoed in his earpiece.

Leaving the firefight and Huxley to his teammates, Blitz saw that Bree had entered the building with Flint right on her heels. He and Bear got to the doorway, checking to make sure there was no one waiting for them. A split second later, they entered and then he saw Flint. He was sitting on the floor, the obvious sign that there was an explosive in the room. As soon as that registered, Bree and Bear both yelled at the same time. “Bomb!”

In two strides, he was to Bree, grabbing her up and hot-footing for the window. Bear and Flint were already beating feet through the doorway. He tossed her unceremoniously out and jumped after her.

The moment his feet hit the ground, Bree was trying to scramble to her feet. His gut went cold. It was a natural instinct. She was trying to get farther away from the blast, but Blitz knew the blast would be much more severe if she stood up, even with the side of the building to protect them. Before she could stand, he leapt forward, pinning her beneath him, covering her body with his just as the IED detonated.

The earsplitting, heart-shaking blast rattled his teeth and set off an intense ringing in his ears. The deafening concussive wave felt like it sucked all their air, disorienting him, throwing him off for a second or two before he could regain his equilibrium. Bullets snapped and cracked up the street. He could hear the rapid fire of his teammates, the suppressed fire making more of a clacking sound, then a boom. His heart was pounding as metal, dirt, and

adobe rained down on them, stinging pain in his neck and shoulder.

Regaining his balance, he rolled to the left in time to see a terrorist raise a rifle. Then in the next instant, a black missile flew out of nowhere and latched on to his arm. The terrorist screamed and Blitz pulled his sidearm, but a shot rang out, and he turned his head to see Bree up on one knee, her sidearm gripped in her hands. Then she got up and moved over to him. She knelt down.

“Are you all right?”

He nodded and rose with her. Bear had been busy with several insurgents. They lay around him. Until they secured the town and helped Joker, there would be no more running after the squinters. They couldn't even be sure it was Achebe and Olenska. He wouldn't put it past them to plant decoys everywhere. He came up to Bear, who was keeping his head on a swivel. “Let's go help LT.” He keyed his comm. “Joker, we're going to circle around the back to see if we can flush out the remaining AAL,” Blitz said.

“Solid copy. Huxley needs to be medevacked. Buck has already called in a chopper. Any other casualties? We heard the explosion.”

“Negative on the casualties. We took some shrapnel, but it's minor stuff.”

“Copy. Let me know when you're ready to assault.”

The four of them moved back down the street and it didn't take long for the twelve of them to neutralize the last of the fighters.

Zorro had already taken care of Huxley, stopped the bleeding, and administered an IV. He was prepped for the helo when it arrived, and that would be soon as Blitz could hear the *whop, whop* of the Black Hawk's blades.

He sometimes thought he would always hear that sound in his dreams and nightmares.

“Let's move,” Joker said at the outskirts of town. The assault team hadn't lowered their guard, keeping up surveillance all the while they moved out into the open.

The helo came into view in his NVGs, hovering.

The doors opened and the flight medic jumped out and was back on board with Huxley in seconds as Blitz scanned the area. Once Huxley was secured, the team, Webb, and the FBI agents started climbing in. He and Buck were the last to load as they kept vigilance on the perimeter until everyone was inside. He moved to the side, avoiding the edge of the stretcher that had been secured near a window. Huxley was already out. The flight medic had placed

an oxygen mask on his face and sedated him.

The smell of cordite from hundreds of spent rounds mixed with jet fuel and the metallic tang of blood permeated the interior.

Looking at that mask brought back memories of when he'd been shot in Syria. He'd been in bad shape then, Gator doing everything in his power to get him to safety. He'd lost so much blood and hadn't been sure he was going to make it. But Gator had been encouraging him every step of the way until he reached medical attention. He looked over at his buddy, who had just recently watched over all of them. His heart swelled at the sense of gratitude for having such a man covering their backs.

Gator met his gaze, his eyes softening, and he nodded. Blitz nodded back.

The pilot hit the throttle and the helo climbed rapidly, evening out and heading toward Niamey like a bullet fired from a gun. The terrain was a blur of green beneath them and it was still hours before dawn.

He looked over to Bree. She was sitting there unmoving, her eyes fixed on nothing—a thousand-yard stare, an unfocused, vacant stare into a vast abyss of emptiness, slipping into a shock and weariness from which it was very hard to escape. Then he noticed she hadn't holstered her sidearm. The Glock was still clasped in her white-knuckled fist, the back of her hand bleeding sluggishly. He reached out and touched her and she jerked.

"It's okay," he said softly, then pried her fingers off the weapon, slipping it back into her holster and snapping down the leather band to hold it in place. He pulled out his med kit and found some gauze and tape. He cupped her hand, setting the back of her wrist against his knee. He crudely covered the wound and secured it into a makeshift bandage.

She met his gaze, his heart contracting when he saw the way she pulled herself together. This might be her first taste of combat, something out of her comfort zone, but she wasn't going to let that deter her. Fighting the urge to hold her, he settled for stroking his thumb along her palm. The look in her eyes was enough to rip the heart right out of him.

Not quite able to sever the connection, he held her hand as the chopper roared in the darkness toward light, pain relief, and help. With every mile the helo traveled, her hold on his hand tightened, and the tightness in his chest grew. It had been one hell of a ride and although she was a bit shell-shocked, he had the sense that Bree wouldn't be down for long. The woman had performed as well as any Navy SEAL with courage, professionalism, and presence of mind. Even after the blast, she hadn't faltered.

When they landed on the roof at Niamey Regional Hospital, the shrapnel in his neck and back of his shoulder was beginning to smart. He let go of her hand, but she didn't pull away, her fingers lingering against his palm.

Then they had to move as the chopper emptied so that Huxley could be transferred to a gurney and whisked away. The rest of the team moved slowly toward the roof exit. Feeling as if he was moving onto dangerous ground, he stopped when he reached the door, not wanting to step into the light spilling out. He was feeling too damned exposed for anything as civilized as incandescent light.

But his teammates crowded him toward the glow, and they entered the hallway as the doors to the elevator closed and started down. The rest of them took the stairs.

When they got down to the treatment area, Huxley was being rushed to an operating room. His coworkers stared down the hall as he disappeared behind two swinging doors, a myriad of emotions crossing their faces. It was tough to see a friend and leader injured.

Joker addressed the group in general. "He's in good hands. Who needs treatment?"

Several of them spoke up, and Blitz said, "I need shrapnel removed and Bree has a hand injury."

"It's really nothing—minor. I caught some adobe when the IED exploded."

Buck sidled up to him. "I don't remember you ever holding my hand in a chopper after a battle."

"Yeah," D-Day said, "I feel slighted."

Blitz rolled his eyes. "Shut the fuck up."

Bear looked at Blitz. His blunt, angular features were unreadable as usual. "The FBI Fly Team was solid out there. Commendable."

Blitz nodded.

A nurse came onto the floor and started assessing their injuries. Once she was convinced all the injuries were minor, she motioned for someone to go into the treatment bay. Blitz looked over toward Bree who was near the rear of the line. She was standing with her back against the wall and her eyes closed. Dirt and sweat streaked her face, unable to cover the beauty there. His shoulder was on fire, but he couldn't leave her standing there—alone.

Despite all the reservations he had, despite knowing this would be one big mistake in a line of them, he couldn't leave her to handle the aftermath of this

op without some intervention. Aware of the way the guys watched them, he wasn't going to sacrifice her well-being for some future ribbing. What he wouldn't endure was the sense of wrong in letting her twist in the wind. Like he'd said, combat was a game changer, prolonged combat could fuck someone's head up. After their track record from the last week, she was getting hers fucked all over the place. They had been trained to minimize the adrenaline rush and the consequences of direct action. She hadn't.

He didn't want to admit that part of him needed to do this as much as she needed him to intervene. Helplessly, he headed over there.

“HEY?” he said. She went still, then her eyes flew open, and there was an instant—just an instant—when he saw incomprehension on her face, then a flash of uncertainty, of apprehension, and it reinforced his assumption that she was still processing everything. Understandable. He just didn’t want her to wallow. “How are you holding up?”

She lifted her head, all that emotion disappeared from her eyes, and she gave him one of her glittering looks which meant she was still feeling the effects of the adrenaline. The way men and women reacted to adrenaline was a biological fact. Men came down off the adrenaline high quickly. Within fifteen minutes they were back to pre-fight levels. Women took longer to come down off the adrenaline high, so they stayed angry for longer and it trailed off more gradually up to an hour later.

“Worried about Greg, but otherwise okay,” she responded, that thousand-yard stare gone. As he suspected, she would bounce back, but not quite fully yet. He noted the shaking in her hands. Exhaustion bracketed her mouth and lined her eyes. They needed to shower, eat, and to rest. That would help immensely. Just being in the air-conditioned hospital showed him how hard the heat had hit them all. He sighed.

“He took a round to the shoulder. Did some damage, but I think he’ll pull through,” Zorro said as a way to comfort Huxley’s colleagues. He stood a few feet away, his hands clutching either side of his vest, his dark, piercing eyes confident. Zorro wouldn’t say it if he didn’t fully one hundred percent believe it. “But brace yourselves.” His face turned grave. “I think he’ll be out of this fight for a while.”

She nodded, her face evening out, but that shaking hadn't stopped. It was winding him up. "It's the adrenaline," he murmured. He had never been good at subterfuge. He figured the most direct route was the best way to go.

The light illuminated her dirty face, caught in her long lashes and brought out the copper flecks in her amber eyes. "The aftereffects linger for women. I'm aware." Her expression froze and she went so still, it was as if she wasn't even breathing. There was a long, electric silence, her agitation almost palpable. Looking down, her tone artificially bright, she said, "I'll be fine. Everything is just fine."

He looked at her. "Two fines don't make a right, and although you're a good liar, I know what's going on in your monkey brain. So, cut the bullshit."

Her head came up and her gaze riveted on his face, her eyes wide as saucers. She looked down again, her movements jerky. "Did you just call me a monkey?"

She almost made him laugh, as several of the guys chuckled. And he had to admit that he was amused by the way she was maneuvering away from his attempt to engage her in conversation over what happened, but he was a frogman and losing wasn't in his DNA.

Hooking his hand on his good arm around the strap of his vest, he considered her for a moment, and he could almost feel her squirm. He studied her, not liking the awful tension he sensed in her. He decided then that this little word game was over. Using the same quiet tone of voice, he said, "Yes, I did. Monkey brain, lady, is derived from the Chinese and Buddhist concepts of a 'monkey-mind' and is the part of the human psyche that is always restless, distracted, indecisive, frightened, worried. This is the part that worries about what others think. It's also the part that is socially conditioned to fit in and not make waves—because with all the Big Tough Frogmen and Big Tough FBI men, acceptance into these groups equates to survival when you're prey. Unfortunately, this is where humans make most of their daily life decisions. And many people get trapped there when faced with life-threatening situations."

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm a seasoned agent. I'm not prey, Dr. Freud."

Some of the guys groaned and Professor chuckled. "It doesn't have anything to do with Freud. It's just fact, Bree," Professor said.

"You might be seasoned," Blitz said, "but you've sustained ongoing combat and that's different. No matter who you are, these experiences of stress and possible attack will change you." He leaned in and lowered his

voice. "This doesn't mean it will break you, you'll just be different."

Flint barked and Bear immediately shushed him, but Blitz could sense it was from the dog's innate instinct. He knew Bree was in distress. Bear reached for his leash, but before he could clip it on, Flint crossed the hall away from his big handler and stood next to her.

There was an instant, just an instant, where she stood staring at him, almost as if she were paralyzed, then she took a breath, blinking rapidly. Experiencing a fierce, painful cramp in his chest, Blitz forced himself to keep his hand on his vest, the need to touch her almost unmanageable.

Flint folded down to the floor as if he was guarding her.

A lot of people went through this type of response to adrenaline and violence.

Even though he knew it would be cleansing, he understood why she wouldn't let go here in front of him and the guys. He just hoped she didn't keep her emotions bottled up for too long. That would take a toll on anyone. Bree squared her shoulders, her eyes gleaming. She looked at him, a depleted expression in her eyes. Beauty and strength under fire.

She let out a hard breath. "Aren't you full of surprises?"

He gave her a small smile and took her arm, the pain in his shoulder stabbing like a knife. He directed her over to the chairs. Flint was immediately up and pacing close to them.

She plopped down and Blitz crouched down in front of her. Zorro hovered, but Blitz focused on her. She seemed to draw reassurance from him. For a suspended moment, they stared at each other. Something had been happening between them that Blitz didn't want to define. This vibe he got from Bree threatened his carefully constructed armor that protected him against threats of a personal nature, but she was different, and after working with her for so many weeks, he had built something he would label as trust.

Fuck, who was he kidding? He had a raging hard-on for her most of the time.

So, it was hard to deal with the impulses driving him crazy when he caught her profile, or she bit her lip, drawing his attention to her mouth. That line of thinking got him into deep and dangerous waters as vivid images took shape in his mind. The heat and the ache of wanting as he pressed his mouth to hers. The goad to kiss her warred with his reasonable mindset. Temporary situations could only be about sex, and he never invested in anything, unless it was a sure thing. No future meant a limited present, and he wasn't going to

sink fully into that kind of losing situation.

If he could only get past this thing with her that jacked him up to a place he was kicking and fighting not to go. He looked down and the sight of the blood seeping through his makeshift bandage made him want to kill someone, but back in that village, she'd taken the kill herself. He gently caught her hand and inspected it, slowly running his thumb over her knuckles.

Flint came to rest near her thigh, sitting on his haunches. He tipped his head and looked at her, and Blitz swore he was assessing her state of mind. Then as if satisfied she was weathering her storm, he sagged against her legs.

She gave him a wan smile, smoothing her hand over his sleek, black coat. "Thank you." She sniffled and ran her free hand under her nose. "I'll be ready when I need to be." She glanced at the guys and raised her chin.

Touching her did monumental things to him, knocking him for a loop and affecting his pulse rate. He managed to control the nearly irresistible urge to lace his fingers through hers. His voice was strained when he said, "You did what was necessary and did it damn well."

"You're a kick-ass babe," Buck drawled.

After a long silence, Bree sighed and pulled away. With so much gratitude in her eyes that it nearly broke his heart, she met his gaze. That got the smile he was hoping for and a chuckle.

Her eyes twinkling, she said, "Is that so?"

"Everything good here?" Joker asked.

Blitz looked up to see his LT standing near them.

"Yeah, we're just waiting for our turn," Gator said. "So, don't pull rank and jump the line."

The guys broke up in laughter and there was no more time to talk. A nurse called loudly. "Who's next?"

"Oh, great, we're going to get a visit from Dr. Sunshine," Zorro said.

"I only let my regular patients call me that. It's Dr. Quinn to you." Her acerbic tone belied any humor she was hiding.

Zorro winced and turned around with a grin on his face as Blitz rose. "Ma'am," he said.

Dr. Everly Quinn gave him a sour look and said, "Someone needs attention?"

"Yes, ma'am," Zorro said.

She rubbed at her temple. "I feel myself growing older every time you

call me ma'am." She gestured to the exam room. "After you."

Zorro backed up a step. "Oh, it's not me. It's Blitz."

"Blitz," she said in a weary tone.

Zorro gestured to him, and Dr. Quinn said, "After you, Blitz."

"Take Agent West first. Her hand is still bleeding."

Bree rose, her face mutinous. "No, I can wait. You go."

"I don't have all day for your chivalry and selfless acts." She walked over and examined Bree's hand. "Let's go," Dr. Quinn said.

"But—"

"No buts." She led Bree into an examination room. He heard Dr. Quinn's firm voice. "Navy SEALs think they're invincible and they're all about putting everyone else first. There's no arguing with stubborn alpha males. The best way to get this done is to fix you first just like he wants me to."

Bree shot him a helpless look before she disappeared into the exam room. But he could relax a little knowing she was getting care. When the exam room door opened and Bree came out, the back of her hand was bandaged.

Dr. Quinn's voice came from inside. "She's out of the woods now, Blitz. Could we?"

"Damn that woman's bedside manner sucks," Zorro growled with a frown.

"I heard that," Dr. Quinn said.

He entered the exam room, shooting Zorro a dirty look. If the doc was mad, her bedside manner could deteriorate further. He wasn't into unnecessary pain. He sat on the table.

"Are you attached to that?" She nodded toward his chest, her face pinched.

He followed her gaze to his M4. "Uh, no ma'am."

She huffed a sigh, and he went and set his weapon against the wall.

When he came back, she said, "Where are you injured?"

"I caught some shrapnel and debris in my neck and shoulder after an IED blast."

She nodded. "Please remove your vest and both shirts."

The release of the Velcro at his waist was loud in the room. He grunted as he lifted it, the throbbing pain coming to life and zapping him sharply. She started to help him, then gasped. "My, that's heavy."

He unbuttoned his uniform top and groaned as he began to shrug it off. She touched his arm. "Let me." She moved around to the back and grabbed

the material at his good shoulder and worked it free, then carefully slid it off his injured one. "I've got the T-shirt as well." He kept his hands at his sides as she moved to his uninjured shoulder and again followed the same procedure to minimize the pain in his injured shoulder.

She was quiet for a moment as her professional fingers touched and examined. "Looks like minor stuff that doesn't need stitches, except for this one in your shoulder." She walked over to a cabinet and sink combination and returned with a syringe and some medicine in a glass vial. "I'm going to give you a local."

He felt the needle touch different parts of his neck, then embed in his shoulder. The stinging, throbbing pain subsided as his skin went numb.

As she worked, he couldn't stop thinking about Bree. "How is Agent West?"

"Cuts and bruises, a minor injury to her hand, like she said. A bit jittery from the adrenaline. From what I can see, and smell, you all need a lot of fluids, a good number of meals, definitely a shower, and about sixteen hours of sleep."

"Tell that to my CO."

"I already did," she said smugly. She was quiet for a moment, her voice subdued. "Looks like you were in a bad spot."

"Most of my job is in bad spots."

"Fair enough."

"What did my LT say?"

"He said you had a job to do with his tough alpha male attitude, but then agreed."

Blitz chuckled at her exasperated matter-of-fact tone.

"Agent Huxley?"

"He's got a more serious wound, blood loss, but he's going to be all right with some healing time and PT. I'm afraid he's going home. At least he'll get the fluids, food, and rest he needs."

All the while she worked, he hadn't felt any pain, but the sensation of something being extracted from his skin pulled.

"Hmm. Deep enough for a couple of stitches."

She came back around the table. "So IED blast. How's your head?"

"Ringing in the ears, but most of the concussion passed over us."

"Headache?"

"Yeah, but I think that's from dehydration more than the blast."

She got a scope and looked more deeply into his eyes. “Your eyes are very unique. I’ve never seen such a beautiful, mossy green.”

“Are you hitting on me, Doc?”

She didn’t even crack a smile, just raised her brows. She was a tough one. Setting her index finger under his chin to lift it, she flashed the light in and out.

When she finished, he got dressed with her help. “Keep that dressing on in the shower.” She handed him some more waterproof bandages.

He nodded. “Thanks, ma’a—Doc.”

This time she almost cracked a smile. “Later, Blitz. Follow the doctor’s orders and get yourself some fuel and some rest.” She waved the air. “And, most definitely, a shower.”

She left the room, he dressed and grabbed his M4. When he got back out into the hall, Dr. Quinn was standing there writing in his file. He glanced at Zorro, who was looking at her with a peculiar stare...like he couldn’t quite figure her out but wanted to.

Interesting. Did he have a thing for the prickly doc?

“How was Dr. Sunshine’s bedside manner, Blitz?”

She didn’t even raise her head to give him the satisfaction of a response, just kept right on writing.

Amusement lifted one corner of Blitz’s mouth.

Then she pinned Zorro with a strong, direct stare. She walked up to him, the tension growing in both of them. “You need stitches in that gash on your temple. Exam room, march.”

He gave her a belligerent look, then huffed out a breath. “I assessed it.”

She gave a soft, disbelieving laugh and shook her head. “Then you assessed wrong or most likely, you didn’t even know it was there.” She didn’t flinch or look away from Zorro’s dark, dangerous eyes. “Yeah, that’s right. The medic who takes care of everyone but himself. Move stubborn, alpha male.”

He gave Blitz a look that dared him to comment, then he complied, disappearing into the room with her.

He chuckled, but it was soon cut off when he saw Bree leaning against the wall. He walked over and said, “Hey there.”

She turned, looking as bone weary as he felt. “So, this is what it’s like to be a SEAL.”

He chuckled. “Just a taste. I’ll tell you about it sometime,” he said. It was

an off-the-cuff remark. He didn't really expect her to want to hear about his progression to BUD/S and onto becoming a SEAL. Some of the journey was fraught with pain and feelings of betrayal, other parts of it were filled with triumphant moments, hairy moments, and deep, emotional loss moments. The biggest and most unmanageable wound was the rift between him and his dad. He regretted it, but he couldn't figure out how to mend it. Hell, he couldn't even figure out how to talk to his father without things getting heated, argumentative, and out of control. He felt detached from his whole family because of it. It hurt his mom and sisters, but his father just wouldn't be reasonable.

She turned fully toward him, her voice dropping into that husky range women used to signify deep interest. The fine hairs on his arms and neck stirred at the sound. "I would love to hear all about...everything and not just about BUD/S." She touched his forearm.

Through every relationship after Amy, the woman who had ravaged his heart with her Dear John letter while he was still recovering from his bullet wounds in Germany, he'd kept his heart surrounded by thick, impenetrable armor. It was there for a reason, and he tempered it, replaced it when it got worn or dented, polished it with straightforward terms to any woman who thought they would be the one to change his mind, but no one had ever found a chink in it, breached its formidable strength. Not wide-eyed, innocent women who saw him on the street, or mercenary strap-hangers who ambushed him in SEAL bars, or sweet women he'd been hooked up with by friends. No one got even close. Not even Geneve, whom he'd really liked, and the sex had been great.

But this woman, this warrior had found some kind of flaw, and she was sliding into his no-woman's land. She had found his hunger, his loneliness, his hardened, jaded heart enough to pierce it with a pinprick, just a little sting. Why did the thought of ousting her feel like lifting the world on his shoulders? Like he needed an army, backup, a fortress to keep her out? Why did the thought of giving in to those feelings of hunger and need feel so urgent, so important? He barely knew her. Definitely not a sure bet, sure thing, sure anything at this point. All she was asking for was to get to know him better. He'd rather face another IED, run into a hail of bullets, or jump out of an airplane at thirty thousand without a parachute.

His silence was sliding into the awkward-moment kind. He tipped his head, letting her know that he heard her, and he held her gaze for a moment

more, needing the extra second to get his balance back so his words wouldn't come out desperate or pathetic sounding. "Anytime, if, uh, we ever get a break," he said, trying to keep it casual, but his voice was gruff and unnatural. He gripped the side of his vest, not sure why his legs suddenly felt so shaky.

"Damn if I don't get a shower soon, the only females who'll be interested in getting with me will be the warthogs out on the plains," Buck said in his cowboy twang. "The nurses are running from me like I got the plague."

Bree's hand dropped back to her side as another awkward silence settled between them. He clenched his jaw, exhaling a ragged breath. He needed sleep. He wasn't firing on all cylinders here. Usually, he was smoother than this, but Bree tended to fog his brain even when he was coherent. They might be giving off toxic odors, but there was something enticing about Bree's musk that stirred something primal in him.

"Aren't you used to animals, there, Buck, coming from a farm and all?" Gator said with a sly wink and grin, his Cajun accent thick.

"I don't come from a farm, you coonass, greenhorn. I come from a ranch." Buck leaned against the wall, closing his eyes, the fatigue catching up to him, too.

"Yeah, and those female cows are used to a well-hung bull," Professor said, his eyes sparkling with pure devilry as he grinned, then delivered the punch line. "Imagine their disappointment."

Raucous laughter echoed off the walls until Joker said, "Shut the hell up. This is a hospital, not a bar. Get your nasty asses together. We're moving out."

"He's just pissed that after we are squeaky clean, Professor and I are going to get us some."

There were so many *fuck yous* from the guys, Blitz couldn't sort them all out.

There was the sound of raised voices and everyone turned to the examination room. Dr. Quinn stormed out with Zorro on her heels. "I don't know what I even said to set you off. I swear you're pricklier than a prickly pear." Then he said something in rapid Spanish.

Dr. Quinn turned and glared at him. "I would ask you to talk to my husband...oh, wait. You can't. He's dead!"

She folded her arms across her chest.

"What the hell does that—"

“Move out,” Joker said, interrupting Zorro and walking by showing no signs of stopping.

“That was an LT drive-by,” D-Day said.

Without turning around, Joker did a double-finger salute.

Buck looked at Zorro. “I’d watch out, pardner. She’s in a horn-tossing mood.”

Blitz looked at Bree and she had a slight smile on her face. “Alpha males,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” Blitz agreed with a laugh. “We are all a bit cranky, including our commander. Here’s to hope we’re going to get some rack time.”

She crossed her fingers and smiled. “It springs eternal.”

Zorro stood there for a moment, then he started to back up away from Dr. Quinn. He walked backward for a few yards, then gave her a two-finger salute to his temple. “See you around, Dr. Sunshine.”

Her face contorted, and the prickly Dr. Quinn turned away.

Back in the helo, it was quiet all the way back to the embassy. As soon as they exited the bird and it disappeared toward the dark horizon, Joker said, “We’re going to stand down for the next seventy-two hours. Get some chow, rack time and for God’s sake shower, clean your gear.” He pulled at the strap of his helmet. “You’ve got the afternoon for all of that because tonight we’re expected at the kick-off reception for the G5 Sahel Conference.”

There were groans all through the group, including Blitz.

“LT, do we have to?” Buck said, a definite whine in his voice.

“Yes, Buck, we have to. It’s a request from the ambassador, which means it’s an order from me.”

“Do we have to wear monkey suits?” Professor grouched.

“No, thank God. It’s casual formal.”

He heard Bear murmur, “What the fuck is that?”

“I’ve got you, Bear,” Blitz said, used to exactly those types of functions when he was being wooed for the NFL. Bear nodded, relieved he didn’t have to use his brain cells to think that far in advance.

“Now, go clean that gear, stow it, shower immediately afterward, get some grub, rack out until 1800, then report to the embassy. We’ll be going over to the Trasker Gold Hotel downtown.”

They all wearily trudged to the gear room, each of them cleaning all their sidearms and semi-automatic weapons, along with a couple of shotguns in record time. It was rote work.

Blitz turned to his vest. He had different setups for different missions. This was his close-quarters setup, but he had one for ship boarding, desert warfare, jungle warfare, and a set for diving. He stripped everything out of his vest and put it into his personal container: the main mags he wore in three pouches on the front of his vest, extra mags, two tourniquets, and a seat belt cutter he stored in side pouches along with chem lights, and a carabiner. Between his mags and chest plate, he carried his med kit. He preferred to only carry the mags on the front, the camelback in the rear with the drinking tube over his right shoulder. He stored his radio on the left side, and his gun always stayed on his hip.

After wiping down his plates and storing the container and them into his gear locker, he took the vest with him back to the barracks. In the laundry room, he stripped down, emptied his duffel of dirty clothes that had accumulated over the course of the past week, and threw everything, including his vest, into the machine.

Unabashedly walking down the hall, he entered the room where his cot was, grabbed his shower kit, and went inside. Slipping into a stall, he set the temperature to tepid and let the water flow over him. He groaned softly at the relief from the sweltering heat.

He washed himself three times, his hair twice. It was getting overly long and a week's worth of beard needed trimming.

He joined the guys for chow, and they filled up their trays, some like Bear and Gator going back for seconds. Blitz held off, knowing there was going to be a reception and he didn't like a full gut when he slept. Almost comatose after the meal, he stripped down to his skivvies and fell onto his rack.

It was the first time he thought about Bree, the revelation that she was the only woman to breach his walls, and he wasn't sure how he was going to handle that. But as sleep overtook him, he could only think about her courage, the fierce beauty of her, and the way her touch had burned his arm before he slipped into la-la land.

BREE STOOD in front of the window in her apartment provided by the embassy and stared out the window, willing herself not to drink. It was a knee-jerk reaction that had started when she was eight. Alcohol was what her mom used to cope with life, and after her mom had come home from New York City after 9/11, Bree had picked up the same habit. She had fought against it most of her life but got a handle on it in college after seeking help. So, it was a struggle under stressful situations. This time she won over the impulse. She was going to an embassy function, and she needed to have her professional face on. Her mouth was dry, and she was still shaking from the aftereffects of adrenaline. She tried to tell herself it was all normal, and she, the team, and Greg were all okay.

Heavy dusk had infiltrated from outside, secluding the room in shadows and silence, and she stood in the gloom, trying to will away the awful sensation in her abdomen—a sensation comprised of sorrow mixed with shame.

She'd started drinking in high school, something she'd learned from her mom who had always self-medicated with wine. Bree had her first taste of alcohol at eight years old and found it natural to imbibe when she was stressed. There were occasions in high school when she'd gone to class drunk, especially when something triggered her 9/11 memories. But it wasn't until she was in college and facing four years of parties that involved alcohol that it was clear she had a problem. She'd hidden it ever since. She'd even hidden it from her college boyfriend.

After he left and she moved on with her goal of becoming an FBI agent—

something he was vehemently opposed to and the main reason they had parted ways—she fought the urge to drink after hard days. When she allowed herself to unwind with wine, she made sure she wasn't going to be on duty the next day.

She had showered off the dirt and grime from the op, treating her minor cuts with antibiotic ointment, then she'd attempted to get some sleep. But that had been fitful. She couldn't shut down, the day's events running over and over like a movie on repeat. The Fly Team was without a leader as Greg would soon be going home. His wound needed a good six weeks to heal. She had no idea if he was coming back or who was going to assume leadership of the team. In the back of her mind, she thought she deserved the shot, her mind switching from the current, disturbing present to the hopeful future.

Her ambition was to go as far as she could in the agency, then, maybe take up public service or an ambassadorship. She wasn't sure. She respected and admired what Isabelle was doing in Niger.

It was years ago when she was still in high school, she studied abroad in Mali during her junior year through a State Department-sponsored program. She'd already excelled in languages by then, French was one of her favorites, and picking up Bambara was rather easy.

She'd made sure she had plenty of overseas travel on her résumé for the bureau and Mali was part of that. West Africa had changed so much since she'd been a student in Mali. She turned from the window and looked at the clock. It was almost five-thirty. Time to get dolled up. She went to her small closet and looked over the three dresses she'd brought with her. One was a red sultry wrap dress that came to about mid-calf, the other one was shorter, flirtier, and she thought of Blitz and how he might react to it. The dress was blocked, the bodice black and the flared skirt white. But she ended up choosing the third one.

Okay, she loved fashion. Everything from hair accessories, make-up, clothes, shoes and handbags. This particular stunning dress was a soft rose color with velvet appliqués of burgundy roses, the delicate straps tied in a crisscross pattern on her lower back, ending in a bow, exposing all her toned muscles. She tended to pick more feminine dresses to offset her well-defined body. She accentuated it with amethyst double drop earrings, a maroon croc embossed bag, and two-inch, closed-toe matching pink mules with tiny bows on the instep. She left her dark hair loose and wavy.

She strapped an elegant watch to her wrist, and after tossing her hair one

more time, she spritzed on a little scent. She walked to the front of the embassy from her apartment where the limo was going to pick them up.

The guys were all there early, except Gator. He was going with Isabelle and would meet them there. But leave it to SEALs to be ahead of schedule. Freaking overachievers.

As she walked toward them, Buck turned to look at her. He let out a low whistle, garnering the attention of the other guys, including Blitz, who looked sharp in a small-checked black and white, short-sleeved button-up shirt fitted to his chest and accentuating his broad shoulders, dark linen pants, and dark suede sneakers. She had to catch her breath. His dark brown hair was mussed by the wind, those moss green eyes of his as piercing as ever, flashing with heat.

“Shoot, girl. You’re as fine as cream gravy all gussied up.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile, dragging her eyes from Blitz. Buck was such a gentleman, that twang was so cute, and he was as handsome as all get out, but meant business when he had to with his steely-eyed focus. He had on a black western-inspired short-sleeved shirt with white stitching on the shoulders and button placket, with black jeans and dark mesh oxfords.

Professor was standing with his wife, Julia, who was in a simple blue sheath, her blonde hair in a classic twist at the nape of her neck, and he looked sharp in his blue-and-white-striped T, skinny trousers, the cuffs turned up, and a loose blazer pushed up to his elbows, white sneakers on his feet.

D-Day sported a black button-up shirt with a maroon pocket, houndstooth pants, and gray deck shoes. He looked sharp in that outfit, his blond hair catching the light and glowing like gold. Zorro looked darkly attractive in his navy-blue button-up shirt with white palm fronds on it, white linen pants and buff loafers. And, finally, the stoic Bear, accentuating his dark skin and features with a cerulean blue polo with a zipper at the neck and white collar. He was also in black jeans with black oxford-inspired sneakers.

As the limo pulled up, Buck reached for the door, preempting Blitz’s attempt to open it for her. She didn’t miss the fascinating glare he shot his teammate, a response that pleased her to no end. She liked to think that on some level that show of annoyance meant that he cared. Maybe more than Blitz realized. And she found that bit of information both exciting and disconcerting. Maybe this party wouldn’t be as tedious as she expected.

* * *

SAM “BUCK” Buckard chuckled to himself as he settled next to Bree in the limo. Cutting off Blitz had been calculated. It was clear his teammate had a thing for the sexy FBI agent but was dragging his heels. Buck had all the respect and admiration he could muster for Blitz. The guy was solid, with a double backbone, but he needed a push into the woman who also had eyes for him.

Just to stir the pot, he leaned over close to Bree and said, “You handled yourself well this week, especially last night. High tailing after those two squinters. Did you get a good look at them?”

“Thank you,” she said, her pretty amber eyes warm, her mouth curving up into a smile. “I didn’t get a look at them, so I have no idea if it was Achebe and Olenska. The blast allowed them to get away, which was, I’m sure, their plan.”

“Heard you dropped a tango who had Blitz dead to rights.”

She nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“Are you sure you’re not a cowgirl?” He grinned as Blitz stewed. Ha. He swore if Blitz didn’t make a move, he would. The woman was badass with all those toned muscles, smart, sexy, and brave as hell. “Running and gunning seems to be in your blood.”

She flashed him a sassy grin. “I’ve wanted to be an FBI agent since I was young.”

“Did you? Why is that?”

“Nine-eleven. The FBI was under fire then, in the news a lot, and blamed partly for the attacks succeeding. I wanted to make the agency better so that 9/11 never happened again.”

“And here you are fighting terrorists. Got your wish.”

“And then some,” she murmured, her eyes darting to Blitz. Then lowering to her lap where her hands sat, the ragged nails clean, her palms showing some calluses. *From handling her Glock*, he thought.

They pulled up in front of the Trasker Gold Hotel & Conference Center. The building was located in downtown Niamey on *Boulevard de Republique*, one of the city’s safest near the *Palais de Congress*, the Old Presidential Palace, and international embassies. It was a sixteen-story, two-hundred-and-fifty-room, twelve-conference-room facility where the G5 Sahel Conference was going to take place.

One of the hotel employees opened her door and they filed out. Nigerian soldiers patrolled the entrance and the perimeter of the building providing

security. Buck felt naked without at least a sidearm.

They entered the building and once they were in the lobby, it got crowded and he happened to clip the shoulder of a tall, studious-looking man who rounded on him.

“Look where you’re going. You clumsy oaf!” he said.

Buck dismissed the guy as a temperamental, disgruntled attendant, his attention drawn immediately to the stunning beauty he was with. He felt like he’d been kicked in the head by a horse. She was tall and willowy, with big crystal-blue eyes, blonde hair that touched her shoulders, styled in haphazard waves around her oval face. Full lips with a perfect cupid’s bow beneath a delicate nose and sharp cheekbones added to the overall package.

The guy shoved him, breaking Buck out of his stupor.

“Apologize.”

“Charles, don’t be rude,” the woman said, her voice husky with undertones of a slight accent he couldn’t quite pinpoint.

“Who do you think you are?” Bree said next to him. Before Buck could even say a word, she was in the guy’s face. All of his teammates stopped as her voice rang out. “This is a peace conference, and this man is one of our elite special forces, a decorated Navy SEAL! You should be the one to apologize.”

“Bree,” Buck said, but she wasn’t done yet.

The guy narrowed his eyes with a sour look on his face. “Back off, lady. He walked into me.”

“Maybe that’s true, but you never gave him a chance to apologize. Maybe you need a nap because you’re acting like a toddler.”

The guys laughed softly.

“Look, I’m sorry, pardner, for bumping you. My mistake.”

Bree lifted her chin and glared at him. He swallowed and looked around at the guys surrounding Buck.

“I don’t have time for this,” he blustered and marched off, but the woman stayed.

“I’m so sorry for my colleague’s outburst. It’s ungodly hot here and he’s not used to the heat, add in a long plane ride, and he’s sure to fly off the handle. Certainly, no excuse for his behavior.”

“No offense taken,” Buck said, and smiled as Bree huffed her agreement.

“Sam Buckard,” he said.

“Dr. Chiara Accardi.” She reached out her hand and as it slid over his

palm, he felt a sizzle all the way down to his toes. “And your protector?”

“Special Agent Bree West,” Bree said as she shook the woman’s hand. She quickly introduced the rest of the team to her. “We’ll also be providing security for the conference.”

Chiara nodded. “Good to know we have an elite special forces team guarding us. I feel so safe and secure,” she said, her crystal blue eyes going over his features, landing on his mouth.

“Chiara!” Charles the jerk yelled.

“Dr. Charles Wharton has bellowed. I’d better get going so we can get checked in.”

Buck nodded, smiling like a besotted fool, feeling dazed and dazzled. “It was nice to meet you, Dr. Accardi,” he said.

“Chiara, please, Mr. Buckard.”

“That would be Buck or Sam.”

“Oh, the pleasure is mine, Buck.”

Fuck. She was as beautiful going as she was coming. The thought of watching that beautiful face contorted in pleasure sent more zinging through his system.

“Oh, no the pleasure is mine, Buck,” Professor said in a breathy falsetto. Julia nudged him, and he laughed along with the guys.

“Way to have Buck’s back, Bree,” Joker said with a smile.

They continued on toward the main ballroom, but Buck couldn’t take his eyes off Chiara. D-Day threw an arm around his neck. “Man, she’s way out of your league. Never mind. Forget I said that,” he added at Buck’s sarcastic look. “When has that ever stopped you?”

Yeah, when has that ever stopped me? She was worth a kick in the teeth, worth rejection ten times over. Who cared about class? Not him. He was just a rooting-tooting cowboy, and he was going to give himself free rein to rope Chiara in.

* * *

THIRTY MINUTES INTO THE PARTY, Bree had dismissed the asshole who had disrespected Buck. She was too busy fuming about Geneve Bonnet, CEO of H2Omni and participant in the G5 Sahel Conference

Bree was a strong, independent woman, and she didn’t give in to the

kinds of petty things other women fell for, but if Geneve touched Blitz's arm one more time, she was going to break it. *Okay. Geez.* She wasn't going to actually, physically break it. It was a figure of speech. *Mostly.*

She just wanted her to stop touching him.

His forearm to be precise. She couldn't explain it. But there was something innately sexy about a special forces guy and his forearms. When they were tacked up, yes, some more sexy stuff to swoon over, there was very little skin showing, except for those strong, bare forearms. But most of the SEALs on the team rolled up those sleeves, whether it was to help with the heat, or to show that some shit was going down because when this team went outside the wire, some serious shit was definitely going down. Not one of the eight-man team played around out in the field, except for some good-natured ribbing before the action, but it was all focus, all the time.

It was also sexy to watch them move in that crouched, fast walk, guns to shoulders, eyes glued to their scope, watching each other's backs as they got the job done. They communicated quietly and nonverbally like they were one entity instead of eight parts of a greater whole. Not to mention the way their wrists bent to stay near the trigger for immediate direct-action engagement. A shiver went over her skin, puckering her nipples against her cocktail dress and eliciting a tumble of excitement in the pit of her belly at the thought of direct-action engagement with Callen "Blitz" Berenger.

Obviously, there was way more to Blitz than his forearms. She wasn't shallow, for God's sake. Personality was at the top of the list, and it was everything. Geneve might say that she saw him first, but that wasn't true. Bree had seen him first because she'd gone to the same school where he'd lettered in PAC-12 football—Oregon State University. She'd had a front-row seat to his character when she'd attended a frat party, and he was there. He was a protector, gentleman, and stand-up guy through and through. Look at what he had done—traded a football for a semi-automatic, a grid-iron uniform for Uncle Sam's camouflage, a lucrative, multi-million-dollar contract for a modest wage, and constant, extreme danger. He shrugged off fame and fortune, for hidden, heroic deeds that most people would never know he'd performed.

It was strange. There was all this warrior stuff jacking up the tension between them, but she sensed a gentle soul there, too. Make no mistake—this man killed bad guys when he had to and didn't lose a wink of sleep about it. But she sensed there was some kind of damage to his heart, maybe his soul.

He hadn't changed at all.

He was still compelling, still quiet and thoughtful, with a brooding quality that only made him more appealing. The worst was the regret that she hadn't done something back then when she'd had a chance, but she'd been committed to her high school boyfriend who hadn't lasted after college because he was adamant she wasn't going into the FBI. So much for her damn loyalty. Bree had to cut him loose. The FBI was nonnegotiable. There was baggage there, pain, shame, terrible grief from a tragic episode in her life. She wondered if she would ever get over it.

So, was it fate that brought them back together in the deserts of Niger with a common mission? Was this a second chance at seeing what the hubbub was about?

Maybe. She might not want to admit that the pining was the worst. She longed for Blitz, for his touch, for the sound of his voice, a gravelly tone rasping against the eardrums and sending undulating waves of shivers through her in a way she wouldn't have thought possible. It was unbearably needy and embarrassing of her to want a complete stranger so much, all the time. She wanted to kiss him, breathe him in, be with him. It was completely grounded in her fantasy of the man. Reality would probably disappoint her.

That didn't stop her from enjoying him. His face was right up there with his personality and his forearms.

It was clear from working with the team on deployments and in close quarters as they pursued Achebe that Blitz was a respected and integral part of a kick-ass team. Achebe and the Russians were also still gunning for Isabelle. Bree had an inkling there was something going on between that big, beautiful Cajun and the glamorous, kick-ass interim ambassador. The terrorist held a grudge against her because she had used his daughter as leverage. As a result, he had stepped up his activities to battle against the US and their allies.

Their deployments to the field had been ongoing and exhausting, and now they had to split their time between the G5 Sahel Conference and Achebe. The Nigeriens were working security along with the SEALs and the FBI Fly Team.

Isabelle had requested that they all stay, especially her. That's what her boss Gavin Foster told her. That had given Bree a great boost of confidence to know that Isabelle, who was much more than she seemed, had requested Bree to remain in Niger.

Yeah, she was in control. Yeah, Geneve looked like a fragile French cream puff. Girly where Bree wasn't, long and lean where Bree had some heft to her muscles. She bet she had nighttime skin routines with creams and gels. Who was Bree kidding? She outdid her on the female meter. Damn. Was that a pang of jealousy clenching her stomach? She feared it was, and she'd never, ever been the jealous type. It wasn't a good look on anyone.

Speaking of looks. Damn the woman was stunning and she dressed to accentuate not only her powerful presence but her beauty.

Damn her.

She'd also heard a nasty rumor that Blitz had slept with Geneve long before the Fly Team had dropped into Niger.

"What are you staring at so intently," asked Harley Quill, Isabelle's personal assistant as she sidled up to Bree. When Bree didn't answer, her searching eyes settled on Blitz. "Aw, our handsome Navy SEAL. He is worth ogling." Harley frowned. "What's this? You have competition?"

"She's not competition," Bree said.

"Nice confidence."

"He's probably better left to her, Harley. I don't think mixing combat and pleasure is a good idea."

"Damn, are you crazy? That's the best sex. Adrenaline. My nipples get hard just thinking about it."

Bree chuckled, licking her lips, trying with all her might to just let it go, but when Geneve touched him again, she felt her hackles rise.

"She's staking a claim, but he keeps glancing at you."

Bree was going to lose it and go over there and forcefully remove that woman's hand off her—*man*. Damn, she had already lost it. She turned away. "I need a drink."

"Now you're talking."

Bree smiled in amusement. They walked over to the bar together. Bree ordered wine, taking several sips to still her shaking hands.

"So, Blitz is too hot to not take a shot at," Harley said with a sly smile. "I mean look at him."

That's the trouble, she really loved looking at him and she had to agree he was really *hot*.

"It's been that long, huh?" Harley asked, taking a sip of her apple martini. "I know your pain."

"How did you—"

“The look on your face, sister.” Harley lifted her glass with a knowing smile. “Amen to that look.”

Bree took another sip of her wine and sighed. “What is it about a man’s forearms?” she asked.

Harley nodded. “Oh, please. It’s just so sexy. It makes a statement. When men roll up their sleeves, they mean business, especially SEALs. Serious business.”

“Maybe,” Bree said with a shiver. “But I think it’s more about how he holds back his strength when he touches a woman.” Just looking at Blitz’s ropey, defined forearms told her he was strong. He’d chucked her out a window like she weighed nothing. She started to tremble again.

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense and is very sexy. Why are you just looking and not touching?”

She glanced over at him, unable to stop herself. She took in his chocolate brown hair that fell over his brow, the chiseled cut of his jaw, and that beautiful mouth. She was good at interrogations because she was adept at reading body language, and she was picking up those subtle nuances he was exhibiting. Frustrated energy, a resignation about him that bolstered her confidence and gave her hope that Geneve wasn’t going to win him over... again.

“He was so supportive at the hospital,” she said absently, remembering how kind and gentle he had been, even when he was suffering the pain from the shrapnel in his neck and shoulder.

It wasn’t the adrenaline. That might have heightened the experience, but it wasn’t the sole source of her distress.

She’d frozen in her tracks and if he hadn’t acted so quickly, she wouldn’t be here right now. She was convinced now that she’d had some distance from the incident that she’d been overwhelmed by Blitz and his tossing her out the window like a sack of potatoes. He’d saved her life. It hit her so hard, she took a big gulp of wine.

He’d explained why she froze, and she was determined to get as skilled as the SEALs were when it came to those types of combat situations. It was clear she didn’t have the same kind of experience as a Navy SEAL or the same intense training, but she would do her utmost best to perform at their high standards. “That last op was brutal. An IED exploded not far from us.”

He turned his head then, as if he’d picked up that she was staring at him. He watched her, his seductive green eyes intense and searching, as if he was

trying to figure something out, warring with himself. In that moment, she felt a sudden shift between them, as if the air was burning with an invisible flame and they were keeping it ignited between them. His attention returned to Geneve as she glanced toward Bree. Her mouth tightened.

“Wow. Then you definitely should get some while you can. You know, mutual physical pleasure, orgasms, and all that fun stuff. I’m sure it’s bad for your health to go so long without sex.”

What a delicious, decadent thought, Bree admitted to herself with a sigh. “Are we talking about me or you?”

“Yeah, it’s been a long time for me, too,” Harley admitted.

“Then stop throwing your daggers at me, Harley.”

“I’m just stating what any red-blooded American woman wants.”

“Aleksei Volkov.”

Harley stiffened, her eyes widening in her beautiful face. Then she frowned. “How did you know—”

“No,” Bree said, twisting Harley’s head and pointing it toward the door. “Aleksei Volkov is here.”

WHEN HARLEY TURNED toward the door, she sighed softly. The man looked a little dangerous and a whole lot like a rebel. A daring rule-breaker. A man who thrived on risk and adventure. His too-long, tousled black curls were tied in a queue at his neck and the dark stubble shadowing his lean jaw only added to the tantalizing image. Then there were those stunning dark eyes of his that had the ability to tempt her to sin. With him. In many different ways.

Oh, wait. Harley was an undercover CIA Shadowguard, code name Topo. There were obstacles to getting involved with him. Number one being that she was supposed to turn him into a foreign asset. He was a Russian ambassador and needed to be completely off-limits to her to avoid any conflict of interest.

So, yeah, he was definitely on the top of her hands-off list. You know, unless she wanted to cross lines and confuse emotions.

Harley sighed again, and his laser-like eyes found her at the bar. As if he knew where Harley's thoughts had traveled, a slow, disarming smile tipped up the corners of his sensual mouth. *Oh, my.* She consoled herself that she had the skills to deal with this bad boy Russian.

"He would almost be worth losing control," Bree murmured.

Harley pulled her gaze away from him. "Almost. I wonder what the heck he's doing here."

"I'm attending the conference on behalf of the Russian Federation, of course," he said, the amusement in his voice as unmistakable as his sexy accent. He placed his right hand on the left side of his chest and glanced down at Harley, transforming his edgy good looks into a more boyish

appearance. “Control, eh? I’m touched.”

“Don’t get excited,” Harley said. “Sometimes you’re nothing more than a bad penny.”

“But you still pick it up...for luck.” He held her gaze for a few moments, and it was enough to send a shiver down her spine. He turned to Bree, ever the diplomat. “And who do I have the pleasure of meeting here?”

“Special Agent Bree West. She’s FBI.”

“Ah, an agent with your Federal Bureau of Investigation, is it?” He bent down slightly, took her hand, and kissed the back. Bree smiled. “Very lovely,” he murmured as he straightened, then let her go.

She blushed a bit, and Harley rolled her eyes. The man could charm a charging bear with nothing but a honeyed smile. It didn’t help that he was quite beautiful. What a rogue.

A rogue she’d acknowledged, after saving his ass at the Lincoln Memorial when Izzy and Gator had met him for a clandestine meeting regarding Leonid Olenska, and then making sure he got back to the embassy in one piece, made her his protector, but definitely not his friend, confidant, or lover. Harley was definitely not in this for anything except what he could offer for her country.

But a few months away from him did nothing to curb the tension between them. One grin—one flash of those white teeth—and the calculating Shadowguard professional who always put mission first, self second, vanished. And some part of her she didn’t even know took over. This wasn’t a walk in the park. It was a stroll through a minefield.

He wasn’t one explosion, not even two. He was a wealth of explosions from that sexy mouth to his ropey, lean body, to those expressive, cunning eyes. Alexsei was a survivor through and through, and although he came off as just another insipid diplomat, he was anything but. It suited his purposes for people to dismiss him—even his own father, and that was a wound that had cut deep in him.

Dammit. She didn’t want to have any feelings when it came to Aleksei, but she’d been at the Lincoln Memorial as backup for Izzy and Gator when Aleksei had described his love of Lincoln. What red-blooded American heart didn’t melt for a man who loved Abraham Lincoln?

She had just barely escaped getting involved with him, who had been wounded and beleaguered by his own people. She was so impressed with the way he took control, never once letting on that he was at a disadvantage.

She should have told the director no. She couldn't do this, but so much was at stake, and he liked her. It would give her an advantage, and she needed one with him. Getting the charming bastard out of her thoughts was easier than getting him out of her dreams. But she'd signed up for this and here he was, still larger than life, still cocky as hell, and pulling her right back into the same sexual fog she'd barely escaped from the last time.

Another few hours spent near him and who knew what secrets she might have been tempted to spill?

She'd teased him about his integrity, but she was aware Aleksei's loyalties might have been corrupted by Isabelle. Democracy, *real* democracy, wasn't for the faint-hearted, especially when his country seemed to have turned over a new leaf when communism had perished as a viable means to run a nation. But, in truth, the Russian Federation was a dictatorship at its base with their president ruling with the support of his cronies and oligarch friends. Still a bunch of thugs at heart. Nothing had really changed in that society. The people still feared their leaders.

Aleksei did not.

Which, considering he was also the epitome of a bad boy, was quite an intoxicating mix. And doubly dangerous. To her, and to her mission. Izzy, her former Shadowguard partner, was convinced Aleksei could be turned.

It was up to Harley to make that happen by hook or by crook. Seduction? That remained to be seen as to who was seduced by whom. If she entertained the thought, even for a second, that she could control him through sex, then she deserved whatever she got.

"Now that you've flattered us and kissed hands, why don't you tell me why you're really here."

"Is it inconceivable that I wanted to be in your company, Ms. Quill? Find out more about Italy and olive oil?" The way he said it made it sound so extremely sexual. Her entire body shuddered at the mere thought that he wanted more of her, and that any kind of oil would be involved. Her head knew it was business. But tell that to the rest of her. She was in dire need of an edge. More of an edge than the knowledge of any kind of attempt from Aleksei to make her think in terms of what he could do with that body and mouth of his.

She was saved from more verbal sparring with him at the arrival of Isabelle and Gator. They made for a beautiful couple, her delicate, slim body wrapped up in a white, off-the-shoulder bandage dress that hugged her hips

and him in a black short-sleeved shirt, those heavy biceps of his bulging beneath the hem of the sleeves, dark trousers, and black boots.

Saved by the bell, Harley thought, but one pointed look from Aleksei told her they weren't done. Not by a long shot. His mysterious eyes and intent gaze told her that he was here for a reason, and wherever pirates tread, there was always, always the promise of treasure and trouble.

* * *

“BLITZ?” Geneve said, probably more than once. He was distracted, marginally by the arrival of Aleksei Volkov, and primarily by Bree. When he'd first seen her at the embassy, he felt as if he'd been sucker punched, then hit in the head with a wrecking ball. He knew she was beautiful. He now knew she had quite the body beneath her FBI trappings. The dress she was wearing accentuated every curve. But with her hair loose like that, falling over her shoulders, cascading around her high cheekbones, and framing her oval face, it was like seeing her for the first time. In real time.

Not the dedicated agent, nor the steely-eyed operative, but a soft, vulnerable woman. Because there was still reaction there. She was still shaky, no matter the smile she gave Buck when he'd whistled at her, no matter that they were all dressed in civvies, her in that stunning dress. The op from last night was pressing heavily on her.

It was in her reaction to Dr. Charles Wharton and his asshat response to being bumped that told him she was very much on their side.

He turned his attention to the lovely woman standing next to him, her hand on his bare forearm, her eyes confused. He wasn't sure what she was playing at, but he'd made himself clear the last time he'd seen her. It had been fun, but that was it. He had no intention of getting involved...with anyone.

His mind needed to be sharp and focused on what they were doing here. With AAL, the Olenskas' and Z Militia on the move, they had to all be vigilant as fuck.

Geneve was beautiful, brilliant, driven, and dedicated. He admired all those things. She was even more polished and put together than Bree. She exuded confidence, another admirable trait, but she wasn't the one on his radar.

He wasn't looking for a career CEO, or one dedicated to the FBI. He was looking for a normal, strong woman who would be interested in supporting him as a SEAL and starting a family down the road. Money, fame, wealth, and ego just weren't part of who he was. He'd left that life behind and had no intentions of filling it with people he wasn't going to invest in physically, emotionally, or mentally. Geneve was the same as Bree in his mind. They both had other priorities. He wasn't one to bet on anything except a sure thing. With either woman, it would be too much of an effort to keep anything going. Neither one of them even lived in San Diego.

He reached down and covered her hand and her eyes flashed at his touch. He regretted that she had somehow invested more than her body in this fleeting relationship, but he needed to make himself clear. He removed her hand, then let it drop.

Her lips twisted and her eyes turned from confusion to disappointment. "Geneve. We're not doing this again. I'm not interested in moving forward with a relationship. I thought I made myself clear when we parted. We want *diametrically* opposed things. You really don't understand what I do, who I am."

"You're not giving me a chance to even show you that I do want to understand."

"It doesn't really matter. H20mni is your focus and your priority. Am I wrong about that?"

She sighed heavily. "No. It's my company and I've poured so much into it. Maybe I'm ready to commit to something bigger than myself."

"I gave up a lot to become a SEAL. A lot, Geneve. I don't regret any of it. That's not going to change. I'm not interested in being a woman's arm candy or your wealth and prestige. Those things don't mean a thing to me. I'm not going to lounge in some penthouse and lead separate, empty lives with someone who puts a company before family."

"That's so unfair. You don't know me. You don't know what I want."

"I think you're sexually attracted to me, but that's all just fantasy. Real life would be much too difficult and hard. I know. I've been there. Long distance relationships don't work for me."

He could see that she was still trying to deny the truth to herself. "I had a good time with you. But the only place we're good is in bed. You'll thank me for this heartache now. It would be so much more painful later." He stepped back and she blinked several times. "I'm sorry to be so blunt and hard, but

I've never been one to sugarcoat things." He turned toward Bree in time to see Volkov kiss her hand and her blush.

His heart beat harder, his temper flaring at the other man's blatant charm. He didn't know the diplomat well, but playboy was written all over him. Not that Bree's sex life was his business, because it wasn't, but he didn't want her to get hurt. His possessive, unwelcome response was something he *refused* to act on.

"Whoa, back up that bucking bronc," Buck said, coming to stand next to him. Geneve had disappeared. "You can't punch Volkov."

Blitz's hand curled into a fist, and the muscles of his arm bunched with tension. The thought of decking the guy gave Blitz a lot of satisfaction. But one look at Bree and all that energy drained from him. She was hurting, emotionally, mentally, and it ripped his guts out.

"I'm not going to punch him. He's here for the conference and I like my job too much to go off half-cocked." He took a breath as Isabelle and Gator entered the room. Volkov wasn't any kind of competition. The foreign ambassador was on a different plane from Bree. His reaction was knee-jerk, damn him.

"What's up, Blitz?"

"Bree."

"Yeah, you two took a beating, but from what Bear said, she kicked ass."

"Yeah, she's tough."

"But not used to sustained combat."

"No."

"We weren't either when we started out."

"But we're trained for it, Buck. They aren't."

"Right. I get you."

"She's tough," Buck said, folding his arms across his chest. "I will say, her and the boys have kept up with us. It's impressive."

"She is tough, but everyone needs to process stuff. The guys, too. Especially after losing their leader. We need to keep a lookout."

Buck nodded. "Bear said something to that effect." Buck looked from Bree to him. "I take it you've got the little lady?"

"Yeah, I got her."

"More like she's got you," Buck murmured as Blitz started across the room toward her. He ignored his cowboy friend and teammate. He wasn't going to contemplate how he was in deep with Bree. All he knew was that

she needed to talk, or she would be eaten up inside. The stress of losing her boss meant that a lot of the responsibilities would fall on her shoulders being the senior member of the team at least until they relieved her of those duties with Huxley's replacement.

He paused as Harley crossed in front of him in pursuit of Volkov who had made a beeline for Isabelle. Blitz wondered why his pants were on fire.

Bree was watching them go, and although he was curious about their conversation and why Volkov was here, he was still more concerned about her.

Just as he reached her, her cell rang, and she dug in her bag for her phone.

* * *

"WEST," she said.

"Bree, it's Gavin. How are you and the guys holding up?"

"Good sir, considering the circumstances." Gavin Foster was her boss and one of the legends at the FBI. He'd been an agent for all of his working years and was now the deputy assistant director for the Counterterrorism Division in DC.

"Yes, I know this assignment has been more than you all bargained for, but I'm getting glowing reports for all of you, especially you." It was good to hear that she was making a difference here on this assignment, but she was driven to get better results. Achebe and the Olenskys were still out there causing havoc. She intended, with the CIA and SEALs' help, to shut them all down and if possible, bring as many of them to justice as possible. But she was going to keep an open mind. Dead or alive, they would receive their punishment for the Ogdens.

"Greg?" she asked, finished with Gavin's praise. It wasn't going to get the job done. She was more concerned about her now-former leader.

Gavin let out a relieved breath. "He's going to be okay. But he's out of commission as I'm sure you already know." There was a sudden silence and Bree tensed. "I'm placing you in charge. I know this is sudden in your mind, but we've been considering you as a supervisory special agent for some time."

Shock immobilizing her, caught completely off balance, she finally managed, "Me? In charge?" Bree digested that information, the bottom

dropping out of her stomach. She closed her eyes, leaning heavily against the bar. Her right-minded conscience piled some guilt on her head. She'd wanted advancement, but not at the sacrifice of her colleague. It made the pressure of accepting the job all that stronger. A low-grade throb started at the base of her head. Now she felt lousy.

"Yes. I don't have a senior agent I can spare right now, so you're promoted and are now the new SSA on this mission. I've already spoken to the guys about how they're feeling and whether they wish to return to the States. They all want to stay. They're happy for your promotion."

Her shoulders suddenly felt heavy, but she squared them. "I'm stunned, truly." A cramp formed in her throat, and it took a minute before she could get it to relax. "Thank you for putting your faith in me. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't." His tone was confident. "Remember, you've got a family here," he counseled quietly. "Don't be afraid to ask for help."

She clenched her jaw, feeling suddenly very raw. "I'll keep that in mind," she said with a smile.

"Just stay as safe as you can. Listen to the SEALs and follow their lead. I spoke with Commander Lock, and he spoke with Lieutenant Jackman. They're on board with you as the new SSA. I've also informed Kat Cross. We're good to go. Keep sending me your excellent reports and get those people who murdered our ambassador and his family."

"Yes, sir. We'll do our best. Goodbye, assistant deputy director." She ended the call, still leaning on the bar, feeling overwhelmed with guilt, ambition, and remorse.

The weirdest sensation passed through her as if she was standing back, looking through a long, narrow tunnel, somehow disconnected from everything that was happening around her. She heard the low murmur of the crowd as they conversed, the clinking of glasses. People laughed and light music played. Isabelle and Volkov were conversing quite intently with Gator and Harley listening. Harley turned her head and rolled her eyes, smiling.

Bree automatically smiled back.

Harley frowned, gave her a worried look, and started to move toward her, then stopped, her attention going to someone behind Bree. She nudged her head, then forced a smile.

A hand touched her shoulder, and a deep voice murmured in her ear just as she was going to see who Harley was preoccupied with. "Are you all

right?”

She turned around to find Blitz standing behind her. She closed her eyes briefly, not sure if she could handle him on top of everything else right now. “Yes, I’ve gotten some news from my boss.”

“I heard some of it. So, you’re in charge of the Fly Team now?”

Feeling shaky, wishing she could just go back to her apartment with a bottle of anything strong enough to help her sleep, she automatically nodded.

She felt strangely misplaced. Aware that kind of thinking was only going to make her feel worse, she swallowed hard, knowing she was going to have to play this out somehow. Her eyes met his, his expression thoughtful, his somber gaze connecting with hers, a wealth of compassion in his eyes. And Bree knew, from somewhere deep inside her, that Blitz saw through her subterfuge. She held the gaze of his devastating green eyes for a moment, then sighed. “I’m in charge and I lied before. I’m not all right.”

“I know,” he whispered, the sound of his soft, sexy voice setting her heart pounding wildly and her not quite steady hands reaching for her wine glass, but he beat her to it. He lifted it, wrapping her trembling fingers around it. “Your hands are cold.”

The heat of his skin against her flesh made her want more of that heat. His shoulder was braced against the wall where the bar ended, but when he reached for the wine, he straightened, pulling the fabric of his shirt tautly across his chest. As he shifted his weight slightly, his altered position accentuated the strong contours of his jaw and the muscled thickness of his neck. Bree was suddenly keenly aware of his powerful build.

In the diffused light of the ballroom, his hair was a delicious chocolaty mess, some of the strands falling over his forehead. He was watching her with an intentness that Bree found unsettling, making her even more conscious of him as a man. Everything about him was disturbingly masculine: his looks, his size, his strength, even the way he moved. He possessed an animal grace that only made her remember how he’d been on the battlefield. She shivered slightly at that memory—so confident, so focused, so professional. With that memory and the one from Oregon State, the one she couldn’t forget, she fell more under his spell.

He immediately set down the wine glass and took both her hands in his, rubbing them gently. His touch did strange things to both her equilibrium and her pulse rate, and Bree somehow managed to control the nearly irresistible urge to lace her fingers through his. His voice was strained when he said,

“Did you eat anything before you came here?”

She shook her head. For a breathless moment, they stood staring at each other. Something was happening between them that Bree couldn't quite define, but whatever it was, it was potent and dangerous. The power between them was off the charts. He was reserved, almost rigidly contained. Bree wondered what would happen if he let that control drop.

That line of suggestive thinking got her into deep and choppy waters as vivid images took shape in her mind, and Bree found it difficult to breathe. Her voice was oddly husky when she said, “I heard they were going to have a really good buffet.”

His full mouth pulled into an unyielding line, and there was an unusual tenseness about him that she found particularly distressing. He seemed so isolated, and Bree had a sudden need to comfort him. Yeah, that was a dangerous path.

There was no getting around how she felt about such a sexually attractive man as compelling as Callen Berenger. Yeah, she was in trouble here.

So, she smiled in the face of all that trouble and danger and let the chips fall as they may. As if drawn against his will, he stepped closer, wrapping her hands in his big fists, pulling them to his body, pushing them against his chest. The warmth tingled in her palms and as if he was fighting a losing battle with himself, he trailed his knuckles along her jaw, his touch gentle. “Then we better get some grub into you, woman, before you fall over from adrenaline rush and starvation.”

He held onto one of her hands as he pulled her toward the buffet table laid out in one long line against the far wall. Most of the people had already been through. A man was there carving a ham and roast beef. Blitz picked up two plates. He nodded to the guy. “Both,” he said before the guy opened his mouth. He cut several slices for each plate. He turned and handed one to Bree.

While he was getting his meat, she loaded up on salad, wild mushroom risotto with truffle oil, baby carrots with garlic and thyme, green beans with almonds, maple glazed sweet potatoes along with several rolls and butter. They went to a small table and chowed down. The small headache that had been brewing abated as she drank her fill of water, the wine forgotten in the wake of the delicious meal and her handsome dinner companion.

After that, twilight turned into evening, the food hit her like a ton of bricks, and she was sleepy. “I think I'm going to catch a ride back to the

embassy. I'm so totally beat."

"I'll ride with you," Blitz said, his voice husky. "Who knows when we're going to get spun up again."

She nodded, his tone setting off such a reaction in her that she could barely breathe. When he escorted her to the limo, his hand slipped to the small of her bare back. She closed her eyes briefly at his touch, trying to keep herself in check. Soon she would be in her room and this temptation would be a fleeting memory or she would do something completely stupid and reckless. Her blood surged at the thought.

THE LIMO RIDE was somewhat of a blur as she sat next to him, even though there was ample room for him to move away and continue with that resisting vibe he was sending out.

She wasn't a naive woman or unaware of the messages men projected when they were interested in her, and Blitz was interested. Had been from the beginning.

"I didn't tell you everything I remembered about Oregon State and our tenure there."

"Oh, what more is there?"

"You were a sophomore, and I was a freshman. I went to this frat party. I can't remember which one, but it was full-blown chaos and so many drunk people. You showed up with a few guys from the team. There was a girl who was being harassed by one of the frat guys. She tried to get away from him when he pushed alcohol on her. She was visibly drunk, and he was determined to get her to go upstairs with him. You stepped in and set the guy in his place without violence. You made an impact on everyone there with just your stance and words. I was so damned impressed. I've never forgotten it."

"I remember that." He smiled softly. "Guy was a major a-hole. I wanted to punch his entitled face in, but my commitment to the team and the sacrifice of my parents stopped me. Are you disappointed?"

She huffed out a soft breath. "Really, Blitz?" She leaned back and closed her eyes. "But the commitment to my team and the sacrifice of my parents stopped me," she repeated softly. For so long, she'd wanted to tell him how

amazing he was during that volatile incident. “If I hadn’t been involved with my boyfriend, I would have—” She bit her lip and made an embarrassed sound. Oh, God had she said that out loud. Hopefully, he wouldn’t comment about it. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. Maybe because you tossed me out of the window like a sack of potatoes.”

There were many moments in her life that had been profound, but that moment was one of the most dangerous and bonding moments she’d ever experienced with another human being. Sure, she’d been put in many situations that had forced her to step up to the plate. Stand-offs, dark alleyways and shadowed warehouses, undercover assignments, and intense, tension-filled experiences. But she hadn’t ever been exposed to hunting terrorists on their home ground, the gritty, high-octane, adrenaline rush of direct action, of being embedded with a SEAL team who did this on a daily basis, deployment after deployment. If she was in awe, it was warranted.

Her burning curiosity about Blitz and his still-waters facade made her want to delve deep. He was protecting himself against something. She’d always had an eye for that kind of thing, for seeing deeper than the surface. She figured that uncanny ability came from being in law enforcement, of being able to really look into a person’s eyes or read his body language and recognize subtle nuances that nobody else seemed to notice.

She had to wonder how much of her attraction to Blitz had to do with his skill set. Did it matter? She’d seen his character time and again. He was irresistible. She just wanted to press every inch of her body to his, take him hard, explore him with her hands and her mouth, have such a man fill her, fuck her until she was mindless. She wanted the experience of him, the same gritty, high-octane, adrenaline rush of direct-action sex with Callen Berenger.

A SHIVER STOLE THROUGH HER, puckering her nipples against her dress and eliciting a tumble of excitement in the pit of her belly. The thought of getting to him physically made her breathe deep at the opportunity to get to him mentally, emotionally. She had to tamp down those thoughts. It was fruitless to pursue a man like him for just the sexual experience. She wasn’t entirely stupid or that altruistic. Yet there was so much more to be had, but she was in DC, and he would return to San Diego. That was a formidable obstacle to overcome.

“I had to. The IED—”

“I know you had to.” She chuckled softly. His tone was not defensive, but matter-of-fact. “It’s because I froze.” She swallowed hard, some shame and guilt warring for supremacy. She was a professional for God’s sake. She should have been better at that kind of situation. “I couldn’t move or decide that fast. I saw Flint sit down. I knew what that meant, yet I couldn’t process it. You did. Immediately, and acted. You saved my life.”

A strange heavy feeling unraveled in her chest, making her suddenly restless. Folding her arms tightly around herself, she tried to will away that weight. She didn’t know why she suddenly felt so exposed. Especially when Blitz always made her feel so safe. Then she realized why. Her action went against everything she strived for, especially the edict to always be at her best, even if she had to fake it. She couldn’t seem to grasp onto that when interacting with Blitz. It was her own personal failing.

Meeting her gaze directly, they exchanged a long, silent look—a shared, utterly devastating life event, a companionable closeness, a kind of unspoken honesty. She wasn’t used to that at all.

“Then you saved mine.” His words were soft but the emotion in his voice told her that there was so much more there as he watched her with his piercing green eyes. Silence settled in the limo until they got to the embassy. He got out and held the door for her, closing it softly when she was on the sidewalk.

“Good night,” she murmured after glancing at his face, her insides taking a funny drop when she saw how deep in his thoughts he was. She wasn’t going to prod him. They both had been through enough in the past week. If he wanted to talk about it, he would bring it up. Pushing away the urge to hug him, she turned toward her apartment. Hugs were a little too dangerous right now.

Suddenly, he was there. “I’ll walk you home,” he said as if she didn’t have a choice in the matter.

“I’ll be fine, Blitz,” she said, her bravado slipping back into place. She didn’t want to be alone. She didn’t want to drink herself to sleep, cope with alcohol. It was just so easy.

“I’ll walk you,” he insisted. She wasn’t going to push back. If he needed to see her safely to her residence, she could allow him that much.

His presence was manageable during the walk outside, but once they entered her building and got into the elevator, things changed. He stood at her left shoulder, just slightly behind her. She could smell his clean, spicy scent.

“Bree?”

She turned to look at him. “Yes?” The heat and male scent of him overwhelmed her thoughts, aroused her body, and created a heavy, tingling sensation between her thighs. The man’s ability to turn her on, even during an op, was nothing short of amazing.

A glint appeared in his eyes, and the lines around them creased as a smile worked one corner of his mouth. He nudged his chin, but she was completely mesmerized by the vibrant and unusual green color. So beautiful. She had no idea there was such an intriguing forest green ring around his irises.

“Bree,” he said impatiently, nudging again. What the heck?

Bree gave him a wry look. “*What?*”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he gave her a slow, lazy grin, one she’d never seen before. It did amazing things to her. Her stomach tumbled and her knees went weak. “I don’t know what floor you’re on.”

Amusement and a scorching heat mingled in his smoky eyes. Bree winced, feeling a rush of embarrassment heat her face. “Oh, it’s three,” she said, still not moving.

He chuckled this time, then leaned across her. He didn’t touch her, but she could feel the heat from his body, and she braced herself and closed her eyes, sensations washing through her, making her body tighten and hum. He was too close. Too close.

It was almost as if he had physically enveloped her. Bree focused on breathing in and out, a new rush of heat surging through her. More than anything, she wanted his arms around her.

But she stood there, not moving a muscle, afraid of what she would do if she acted. He pushed the button for three and it lit up. The elevator started moving and she was instantly mortified it had taken so much time to just do one simple task. It was his fault for being so enticing.

When the doors opened to her floor, she stepped out, noting he was right behind her. She stopped in front of the entrance to her apartment and turned to him. “Do you want to come in for a drink?”

She was flabbergasted that the words had come out of her mouth. She had really meant to say another good night and duck inside. But her overheated brain had other plans. She expected him to decline. Even with the tension in him, he hadn’t really dropped his guard.

When he didn’t answer right away, she stammered, “Of course, it’s getting late, and I’m sure you’re as beat as—”

“I’ll come in,” he said, staring down at her, his eyes dark and unreadable.

“O-okay,” she said, turning to the door. But it was as if she had forgotten how to do the simplest of things. She tried to fit the key in the lock, but missed, twice. His big body slipped between her and the door, his hand engulfing hers as he steadied her enough for her to get it into the lock. Her whole body twisted with need. He let go immediately.

She stepped inside and he followed her. She flicked on the light near her bed. The room was sparse with a bed, dresser, a small kitchen table, and a couple of chairs. There was a sofa and a coffee table along with a wide-screen TV on the wall.

“I think I have some whiskey.”

He looked around the room and shook his head. “I don’t want to be dulled by alcohol,” he said.

She nodded with relief. She didn’t want to get anywhere near a bottle right now.

“I think you need to talk.” He turned to look at her, his features still unreadable.

Was this just a therapy session? Was he just being kind?

“Do you need to talk? Or do you want to listen?” He went to the sofa and sat down.

“You’re going to give me some insights?”

“Yes. I know there are several things you are dealing with right now.” He paused, his face softening. “How you handled the op, Huxley’s wounding and the subsequent loss of his leadership, your boss putting you in charge, your determination to complete your mission and apprehend the Ogdens’ assassins, and simply the pressure of all of these situations.”

She blew out her breath. He had nailed everything except her deep attraction to him. That he wasn’t touching...at least not yet. “Okay, I’m listening.” She walked over to the sofa and sat down.

“I don’t mean any disrespect to you or your team. All of you are rising to the challenge, but I had and still have my concerns.”

She’d learned a long time ago, especially when it came to training, that the more open she was to ideas and suggestions, the better she would perform. “No offense taken. Go on. Tell me what you want to say.”

“As military men, combatants, we’re trained in a different manner than law enforcement. That includes the police, even SWAT, FBI, ATF, DEA, and NCIS. Unless members of those organizations were ever military trained.” He

watched her with a steady, unnerving look. “Normal law enforcement is suited to civilian threats and are given the tools for investigation, apprehension, and arrest. We’re trained for sustained combat against military combatants. It’s a different mindset.”

She felt oddly uncomfortable, as though he’d found her lacking in her training, but that was a knee-jerk reaction. She didn’t want to jump to conclusions or put words in his mouth. She waited for him to continue.

“I’m not telling you this to make you feel inadequate, Bree. Like I said, you all are exceeding our expectations.”

She suddenly realized that it was a huge compliment coming from a Navy SEAL. They were elite warriors. She let out her held breath, and he nodded as if he’d just punctured her inflating balloon.

“We, as special operators, are trained with a combat mindset. We identify ourselves as the weapon, not our tools. It’s a system that operates cohesively to kill the enemy and survive. It separates us from someone who simply has weapons qualifications and equipment.”

“Like the FBI.”

There was an awkward silence, and suddenly the companionship they had shared seemed like a distant memory. For one heart-stopping instant they stared at each other, invisibly linked by an acute awareness, then Blitz exhaled heavily. “Like the FBI,” he repeated with a nod. “They’re instinctive behaviors that have been honed in every one of the members on my team. Not only do we have the same mindset, but we also have the same purpose. We own the battlefield and when we haven’t locked it down, we move forward into the heat of the battle. We don’t worry about the enemy. We kill them until we reach our mission objective. The only things we care about are the guys on our team, any vulnerable noncombatants, and the mission. That’s it.”

“So, what are you saying?”

He leaned forward. “You froze because you haven’t been in that situation before. Even though you knew that when Flint went to his haunches, it meant there were explosives. You still had to process it. My job on the team is a breacher. I’m the guy whose job it is to remove physical obstacles such as doors and walls so my team can do their thing. I’m more aware of explosives because I work with them. So, I don’t process that stuff anymore. I’ve been in so many situations that when that is a reality, I handle it immediately.”

“And when I shot that guy?”

“It fits right into your mindset. I was vulnerable, and you were defending. You reacted instinctively.”

“So, you’re saying that I didn’t fail exactly.”

“Do you feel like you failed?”

“Yes, I do.”

There was a wealth of understanding and compassion in his eyes, and he reached for her hand, absently caressing the back with his thumb. His hands were strong, with wide palms, solid, long fingers.

“You didn’t and I’ll tell you why.” For all his dark intensity, he had a very warm, soothing tone to his voice. It made a person want to lean closer. “Failing would mean you were dead because I didn’t react, and I would be dead if you hadn’t reacted. It doesn’t matter how we’re serving our great nation. We are one team. We have that team mindset, Bree, and that’s a good thing. It saved us both out there.”

“All for one and one for all?”

He chuckled, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. “Yeah, something like that.”

She didn’t know Blitz well, but if she had to guess, he was trying to ease her anxiety, her penchant to kick herself when she was down, and try to work out her own actions and how they had affected others. She shut that mental path down. It was pointless, and she wasn’t the type to feel sorry for herself. Besides, she had more than enough to worry about. “I think you’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“I’m a SEAL. I don’t do mushy.” He delivered it deadpan. His only giveaway was the glint in his eyes. She laughed. He was so dry, and up until today had struck her as somewhat of a hard-ass. A really lethal and focused hard-ass, but one all the same. And, in some ways, he was. Except for when he wasn’t like at the hospital and now with her here. He was consoling her, and whether he liked it or not, was trying to make her feel better. And surprisingly, she did.

“Is that so?” His wry humor had been unexpected, but it was so much a part of him. But it worked on her far more than his good looks.

His lips curved. “Okay, maybe a little. You know, when I get a knife for a gift or after one of the guys pins me then pats my shoulder.”

For a tough guy, he had no qualms about making fun of himself. It was far too charming.

“I’m glad I have that defending mindset.”

“Me, too,” he said, giving her a half shrug, which was cute and endearing and had her clenching her teeth before she said something completely inappropriate. “Now about Huxley. I overheard your conversation.”

“Didn’t your mom teach you it was rude to eavesdrop?”

“Yeah, she did, but I’m nosy. Football player, SEAL, alpha guy.” That wry curve appeared at the corner of his mouth as he casually leaned forward, pinning her with those perceptive green eyes. “What?” he asked, amusement in his tone.

“Busy body.” She tried not to smile, tried to think business, but the pull of him was so darn magnetic.

It was invigorating, but also exhausting. A whole lot of emotions were being expended into the air every single day, and it did zap a person, even if it was for the very best reasons. Today was one of those days. But it didn’t matter. Blitz had read her, picking up on her less-than-sharp reflexes, or worse, her tension. Tension that really had nothing to do with the day she’d put in, and everything to do with the man who was invading her world. But the day she’d put in made hiding those feelings a little tougher. And she needed all the stamina she could muster to keep her wits about her.

“Your boss promoted you. You’re in charge now. What does that mean to you?”

“Several things. Things I’m not sure Greg really related to your superiors, but I’m fully aware of.”

“Like what?”

“The FBI has changed dramatically from the J. Edgar Hoover days of gun-toting, fedora-wearing G-men gung-ho on catching bank robbers and top-ten most wanted fugitives to an organization committed to stopping terrorist attacks of a scope and nature unlike anything America had ever seen. Everything changed with 9/11. Now we’re dedicated to targeting people who perpetuate terror. Brutally murdering our ambassador and his family crossed a line we never even thought the Russians would dare to cross. It is political suicide, but as we delve deeper into this situation, we’re uncovering so much more. Like the topmost government officials allegedly never sanctioned it. Or did they? Was it a conspiracy? Or did Z Militia and the Olenskys see an opportunity in West Africa for resources that the government wanted and exploit it? We know that they wanted David Ogden to cease his diplomatic mission here. He was making amazing inroads, and that was messing with their plan of destabilization. They eliminated that threat.

“Their group has committed terrible acts across Africa without impunity. But in this instance, it was a blow struck against us, against the United States, and we cannot let the murders of one of our high-ranking diplomats and his family go unpunished. We will bring whoever is responsible, from whatever heights to justice. Whatever it takes.”

“What’s your background in this? Why did you join the bureau?”

“I wanted—”

“No, not the agency crap you spouted for Buck. Why, personally, did you want to be an FBI agent?” he asked gruffly.

That got her back up a little. She didn’t spout anything. Why was he questioning her like this? Determined to prove herself, she said, “My mom was in New York City on business attending Fashion Week for Saks Fifth Avenue. She was one of their premier buyers. She’s now with Michael Kors at his corporate office in New York City. But back in September of 2001, she was in Bryant Park just before the Oscar de la Renta show when the first plane hit the tower. She was consequently stranded after they canceled Fashion Week as all air traffic was halted. Phone lines were jammed, and I couldn’t get through to my mom. I had no idea if she was alive or not. It was the single most terrifying event in my life, made even more horrific by all the parents who did die on that day.”

“Wow. How old were you?”

“Eight. I had already lost my dad to the Battle of Mogadishu just after I was born. I didn’t even have a chance to get to know him.”

“I’m really sorry, Bree. That must have been hard.”

She nodded. “I’ll tell you all about it some time.”

“We’ll swap stories for sure,” he said. “You said you wanted to be an FBI agent since you were a little girl. How did you prepare for that?”

“Do you want my credentials? Don’t you think I can handle this job?”

“I didn’t say you could or couldn’t. I’m just asking.”

She got up and paced away. Then she went into the small kitchen and found the whiskey. The pressure of being in charge, then having to justify herself was irritating. But Blitz had a right to know who he was partnering with. She downed the shot in one go, the alcohol burning its way to her stomach, leaving a warm glow.

She braced her hands on the countertop, working at her sudden anger. She thought he’d trusted her.

He came up behind her, his closeness overwhelming her senses, and she

swallowed hard, trying to struggle against the longing that surged through her, making her heart race even faster. “Tell me about your journey.”

Her insides were in a turmoil, so sensitized to him that she was conscious of every movement, every breath. Her attraction mixed in with the resentment of having to put her résumé out there to be scrutinized. “I started preparing in high school, did Future Leaders Exchange sponsored by the State Department in Kazakhstan, honing my Russian. It was my first trip there, then a year abroad in Moscow, then another State Department exchange, this time to Mali where I was exposed to French and Bambara, then as youth ambassador through another State Department program in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Exchange.”

She stepped toward him, driving him backward, her voice rising a bit. “This time to Rio where I mastered Portuguese and Spanish. In college it was as part of CIEE to Beijing, China, Mandarin. My first year after college I signed on with AmeriCorps California sponsored in conjunction with FEMA where I was a team leader.”

She poked him in the chest as she continued moving him backward. “My first official job was as an LAPD patrol officer for two years where I met a minor girl who was being trafficked, built a rapport with her, and identified the people involved. It got the attention of the FBI’s Child Exploitation and Human Trafficking Task Force, who worked with me to bring them down. I’d identified an extensive network of both American and overseas girls, a ring of six traffickers. Two main offenders each got sixteen years in prison. With victim statements, combined with search warrants and electronic evidence, I helped bring down an additional four traffickers who played other roles, such as leasing apartments used for trafficking, recruiting girls and women, transportation, security, and collecting money. After my patient rapport-building with traumatized victims, as well as traditional investigative work such as search warrants, surveillance, data analysis, and coordination of multiple agencies, I was asked to apply to the FBI and got in as an agent on my first try. Been with the FBI for five years.”

As the back of his legs hit the edge of her bed, he sat down on the mattress, and she towered above him, her flurry of words ending. She lifted her chin, battling the knee-weakening awareness of his large male form on her bed.

“Impressive,” he murmured, only making her more determined to defend herself.

She leaned down right into his face, anger flickering through her. “On the Fly Team, I have been toe to toe with fanatical jihadists, Taliban members, young, radicalized Americans, and shrewd terrorism facilitators who were making a buck off of murder.” Feeling shaky and emotionally exposed, she finished with, “Why do you need an accounting of my résumé? Don’t you trust me?”

He held her gaze, his expression softening, something in his eyes making her heart contract. “I didn’t *need* your résumé. You *needed* to remind yourself why you’re here, what you have to offer, and not to feel guilty about taking Greg’s place. You speak more languages than him, have had a wealth of experience, and are supremely qualified for this job,” he said, his voice husky with strain, his eyes going to her mouth.

Letting her breath go in a rush, Bree closed her eyes, a thousand feelings speeding through her. And every one of them was tied to Callen Berenger.

“Damn you,” she said as her anger fractured and the passion that was wound through it was all that was left.

Taking his face between her hands, she leaned into him, her mouth hovering over his as she looked into those deep green eyes, showing her that every nerve in his body was as stretched to the limit as hers were. She shuddered out a breath, her lips closing that gap, her mouth covering his. Blitz inhaled sharply and cupped the back of her neck. Murmuring her name, he drew her toward him, and she folded her legs on either side of him as he pulled her over his thighs and hard against his groin. A low sound was dragged from deep inside her when she felt him hard and fully aroused against her.

THE CONFERENCE COCKTAIL meet and greet was still in full swing, although Harley did note that Blitz and Bree had left. She couldn't really blame her. Bree had been through something harrowing and tough to deal with. The SEALs were hardened and tested. Even she and Isabelle, through their Shadowguard adventures, had the kind of experience to handle those ops, but Bree had been thrust, albeit willingly, into a real firefight. The kind that tested the strongest of people.

Harley always considered herself a good judge of character, and she suspected that Bree West was made of titanium. She would rise to the occasion, not only because of her job. The girl was a true, dedicated, dyed-in-the-wool patriot. And the job of hunting down the people responsible for the Ogdens' deaths was going to take the equivalent of the CIA, FBI, and the SEALs. If she was a betting woman, all her chips would be on Bree.

"I was sent here to handle the conference. My government feels that they should be involved in humanitarian endeavors," Aleksei said, drawing her attention back to the matter at hand.

Speaking of being a good judge of character... This is what made him a good diplomat. He actually delivered the line with conviction and a straight face. Harley had gone back and forth with her suspicions that Aleksei Volkov was a womanizer. But then the night he'd been wounded at the Lincoln Memorial had changed her thinking about him. It was true he had charisma, charm, and the desire for excitement, but the way he'd treated her and talked about his mom and sister didn't jive with the typical womanizing narcissistic traits. Womanizers also rarely pursued a woman like Harley. She wasn't even

in the realm of submissiveness, had strong boundaries, and was strong in her own self-worth. Womanizers normally didn't pursue strong women. They preyed on emotionally weak women.

After Volkov's politically correct response, Izzy wasn't going to let that pass. She was now the leading diplomat in Niger, but this was Aleksei. The man never did anything politically or personally without a reason. He wasn't exactly favored at the Kremlin, but his father was a high-ranking cabinet member. Unlike Aleksei, he had no love whatsoever for the United States.

"They are often involved," Izzy said, the undertone indicating that they were the cause of grievous acts against humanity for the sole purpose of exploiting the masses. Aleksei was way too perceptive not to understand Izzy's meaning. Gator had the nerve to scoff, and Izzy elbowed him.

Unruffled, Aleksei lifted a broad shoulder, and said, "Yes, they are," he agreed. "But I've been in DC for the last two years and have focused my attention on our business there." A tingle of heightened awareness shivered over her as she wondered how many times their paths might have crossed in those years, given how often she'd been in DC. "I quite love the nation's capital. So steeped in history. It reminds me of St. Petersburg."

Until she was given the task of turning him into an asset, she had only heard about him here and there. The dossier she'd received on Aleksei was a wealth of information. He was the only son of Pavel Volkov, the Foreign Minister in the Russian hierarchy. His mom Polina was the daughter of a powerful oligarch, and his sister Mila was in advertising. Aleksei enjoyed a privileged life with a ruthless upbringing in all the best schools. He was proficient in many languages, versed in fencing, debate, and equestrian, a participant in the Olympics when he'd been in his early teens, winning a gold medal on the back of Captain Hook. *Appropriate*, she thought wryly. For an ambassador, accused of nepotism, given a post most thought was too important for his youth, he'd done an admirable job of maintaining diplomatic relations. It was that rapier wit and brilliant mind. She had been proud of herself for keeping her distance and thought that would help to diminish his impact on her thoughts and quiet moments, but it hadn't helped one bit.

She cursed herself. She should have turned down this assignment.

But the part of her that thought about him in her private moments wouldn't concede. It was during those times she would think about what it would be like to be with him, intimately, get her hands into that gorgeous

head of hair, feel the heat of his skin against hers. Those thoughts drove her wild.

She was a dark assassin, not a stupid, insipid woman who couldn't handle one sexy man. It was a good thing that Aleksei was clueless regarding her fascination for him. Damn him.

With her features coolly unaffected and controlled, she ignored the way those gray eyes kept assessing her. She only used sex as a ploy, never planning to go through with the act, just getting her target off guard. But with Aleksei, she'd never been challenged with him until she'd saved his, Isabelle's, and Gator's lives in DC. He seemed more real and down-to-earth then, the facade of his charm absent.

He had been wounded and seriously shaken by the whole encounter at the Lincoln Memorial the first time they'd met but had been masterful in trying to hide it with humor and dismissing remarks. But Harley remembered the way his hand trembled when he'd gotten that stiff drink so she could attend to his wound.

"We value you as our ambassador, Alek. Maybe we can collaborate in the future."

He gave her a winsome, noncommittal smile, his dark eyes holding secrets Harley wanted to unearth.

In the quiet after his words, to her utter mortification, her stomach grumbled. He turned to her, mischief in his eyes. "Isabelle, how overworked is your lovely assistant that you don't allow her to have a proper meal?" he said.

Isabelle gave Harley a pointed look. *Get to work* was clear in her eyes.

"Harley doesn't need my permission to do what's best for her. We'll mingle." She slipped her arm through Gator's. The sweet, dark look he gave Izzy made Harley envious.

"Shall we?" Aleksei asked, offering her his arm.

She gave him a wry, suspicious look and declined to touch him. It was best that way, then she wouldn't have to know how he felt, wishing her reaction to him would stop reminding her of the problem she was currently experiencing. Any touch would make her want him to invade her boundaries. Often, and with great fortitude. "I appreciate your offer, but I'm used to walking on my own," she said, needing like mad to find her way back to solid ground.

He inclined his head unruffled. He gestured with his hand that she should

go first. As she moved in front of him, aware of him so close to her back, she steeled herself. This was going to be one of her most epic assignments, but also one of her most challenging.

But then, she did so love a challenge.

She felt him behind her the whole way to the buffet table but kept her focus on the delicious-looking dishes. He stopped just behind her, so close she could feel his breath stir her curls. "I wouldn't ever compromise you, Harley."

That was such a strange thing for a Russian diplomat to say to an American spy. But he didn't know she was CIA. At least she'd never told him what she actually did for a living, and it wasn't as an assistant to Izzy. She couldn't return the favor.

"That statement could get us both into trouble. Mr. Ambassador. Us being adversaries."

He leaned a bit closer, and she stared that much harder at the food. "Is that what I am to you, Harley? An adversary?"

She tried not to visibly shudder in pleasure at the feel of his breath on her neck, his body heat warming her even from the slight distance there still was between them. "We'll have to see what the future holds."

He moved a teensy-weensy bit closer. "Won't we," he murmured.

Harley had been doing this "get interest, slide in the views that coincide with the way someone thinks, then build a rapport" thing for some time. This...thing with Aleksei was already there and she debated whether it was a good idea to use her sexuality here, reel him in, and mine him for gold.

It would be easy. He wanted her and she wouldn't find it any hardship to physically be with Aleksei.

So why was there this...thrice-cursed resistance?

Maybe it was because Volkov was a decent man, compassionate, thoughtful, willing to risk his life for what he believed in. It stood to reason that he would be willing to give her information about his government. She selected several items from the smorgasbord laid out in front of her, well aware how many people in this country would go hungry tonight. But it wasn't her job to feed the hungry. It was her job to recruit spies and sources around the world to gain an advantage to maintain her own country.

She lived many different lives. One with Isabelle when she was Harley Quill, assistant, one where she was Topo and killed or rescued people as a CIA Shadowguard at the behest of her government for the good of the United

States. She didn't ask questions about the assignment. She did what was required. Then there was her family who knew nothing about her "real" employer. That was the toughest job of all.

They made their way with their plates to one of the tables set up close to the buffet. Harley sat down and Aleksei sat next to her. He stared at his meal for a moment, and Harley asked, "Not hungry?"

He sighed and looked away, something about his demeanor changing before her eyes. He looked regretful, stressed for a moment, then the look shuttered. "I'm reminded how much my mother enjoys these little cakes. The name escapes me," he murmured fondly, his eyes unfocused. He glanced at his watch and shifted, looking out on the floor like a hunted animal.

"Petit Fours," Harley supplied. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything?" he said. "We both live a life of intrigue and danger. Whenever is anything at all right?" He made an impatient sound in his throat. "Meet me on the sixth floor near the elevator. It's imperative I talk to you without an audience and free of suspicion."

Before she could say anything, he rose abruptly. His two bodyguards who had been keeping their distance started toward him. He made his quick departure across the floor, waving after him. He talked to them briefly, and their eyes darted to her. Then they all left the ballroom.

She turned her head looking for Isabelle. The ambassador was talking to Niger's President Umar and his wife Mojisola." Of course, Isabelle and Gator had noticed Aleksei's departure. She frowned and Harley shook her head. She'd barely made any inroads. It wasn't prudent to ignore Aleksei's request. Something was definitely up and the Russian ambassador to DC was agitated. She'd never seen him like that, not since the night she'd saved his life.

She wolfed down several chunks of chicken and quickly washed it down with her glass of water, ignoring her drink. She really needed to be sharp here.

Rising from the table, she watched as Gator took over the conversation, freeing Isabelle. Harley made her way over to her.

"What?"

"Something's up. Aleksei wants me to meet him upstairs."

Isabelle frowned. "Okay but put in your earpiece and keep Gator and me updated. If you need back up, there's a room full of Navy SEALs."

Harley nodded. "I can handle Aleksei," she murmured as she turned away, walking slowly and leisurely toward the lobby and the hotel elevators.

Most of the conference attendees had already checked in and the lobby was almost empty. When she reached the elevators, she pushed the button and got inside when the doors opened. She pushed his floor button, taking her earpiece from her bag and tucking it clandestinely into her ear.

When the bell dinged and the doors opened, she stepped out. Someone came up behind her and crowded her toward a shadowed alcove. “Keep moving,” Aleksei said. “Act like you’re into me.”

Harley didn’t think that was going to be a problem.

As soon as they were tucked inside, she turned, and he pressed his lean, heavily muscled body against hers from chest to thighs. He smelled so damn delicious, a heady scent of some kind of exotic spice. He grinned wickedly, eyes dancing. But was that part of the show? He leaned his face close to hers, one hand sliding around to the back of her neck, the heat of his hand a shock to her senses, the other slipping around her waist to hold her in place.

That strange sense of desire and anticipation crept along her nerves. If she leaned forward, he would kiss her. She could see the promise in his eyes and felt something wild and reckless and completely foreign rise up in answer, pushing her to close the distance, to take the chance. His eyes challenged her, his mouth lured—masculine, sexy lips slightly parted in invitation. What fear she felt was of herself, of this forbidden attraction.

He moved closer, his mouth an aching temptation and her breath got trapped. Her gaze was locked on his face. Her body was very aware of his nearness, melting in response to him in ways that were innate and essentially female. He backed her up against the wall, caught between an stubborn object and an powerful force. He lowered his mouth toward hers, inch by inch.

She should have moved. She should have stopped him. She couldn’t compromise her mission, her duty, her principles. He was a foreign agent, and she was succumbing to him with her thoughts and with her body.

He was a man with a reputation for seduction, a string of women as part of his glittering life. He had no business touching her, and she had no business wanting him to. She should have stopped him, but she had to play along.

She shivered at the first touch of his lips, blinking as if the contact had shocked her. He held her gaze, his eyes dark and intense, mesmerizing. Then he settled his mouth over hers and thought ceased. Her eyes drifted shut. Her hands wound into the fabric of his shirt. Aleksei pulled her close, slanting his mouth across hers, taking possession of it. At the first intrusion of his tongue,

she gasped a little, and he took full advantage, thrusting slowly, deeply into the honeyed warmth of her mouth.

Her hands explored him without her permission, and unable to stop herself, she found his shoulders, sinking into the hard muscle she discovered there, before sliding along the back of his neck and displacing the band that held his hair as it tumbled around his shoulders. She burrowed into all those thick, dark curls. He pressed his hips to hers, growling just a little, as she scraped her nails against his nape. He murmured something so guttural and thick in Russian, she couldn't make it out or it could be because she was drowning. He fit perfectly between her legs, and she pushed back, cradling the hard bulge pressing there as she clutched at his head to keep his mouth on hers.

She told herself this was just a show for whoever was watching him. Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, SVR most likely.

He broke the kiss and ended it. But rather than having an awkward moment when he lifted his head and looked into her eyes again, he smiled. And she smiled back. And it was somehow normal, and natural, with a little hint of co-conspirator twinkling in his eyes, as if they had these little assignations all the time. And she couldn't help but think how wonderful that would be.

He grabbed a lock of her hair and toyed with it, glancing up through those impossibly thick lashes, then whispered, "This is a matter of intense urgency, Harley. We need to play this out for my countrymen watching. If they suspect you're CIA...we're both dead."

"I work for Isabelle—"

"Isabelle is CIA. She always has been and you're my little mouse. Topo." He chuckled softly.

Her heart suddenly hammering, Harley gazed back at him, the clamor in her chest making it hard for her to think. He knew? How? Unsettled by those thoughts and his knowledge, she dragged her gaze away from his. This would be a good time to remove her earpiece which she did, tucking it into her bag.

"Harley?"

She didn't know what the urgency was, but Isabelle trusted Aleksei. She'd alluded to that several times, and Harley trusted Isabelle completely. They had been partners for a long time. If Aleksei said it was urgent and Harley had to compromise herself for the good of her country and to protect Aleksei as their source, so be it. "Yes, okay, yes." He released her and took

her hand, leading her down the hall to his hotel room.

He opened the door and dragged her inside, then pushed it closed. For a moment he stood there like he was fighting an internal battle he was losing. “This isn’t how I treat women,” he said. She wasn’t sure what to think about that. His tone gave away nothing she could use to determine how he felt about it.

She nodded. She warred with herself, knew that she wanted him, had since the night she’d supported him, touched his skin, protected him. Was she strong enough to be with him and not engage her heart? She wasn’t sure. The cold-blooded Shadowguard just wasn’t sure. Her body was fairly humming in anticipation, and it was all she could do to refrain from grabbing his head and hurrying him the hell up.

Like he said. It was urgent.

She stepped toward him, lifting her face, unabashed about whoever might be watching. This was between her and Aleksei, two seemingly opposed rivals, enemies in the real world, their privacy in the matter moot. He dropped a whisper of a kiss across her lips, then another, inviting her to participate. They were either in it together, or not at all.

He lifted his head just enough to look into her eyes, a silent question of his own. *Will you sleep with your enemy?*

His lips brushed across hers. Warm, a little soft, but the right amount of firm. He slid his fingers along the back of her neck, beneath the heavy fall of her hair, sending a delicious little shiver all the way down her spine.

She held his gaze for what felt like all eternity, then slowly lowered her eyelids as she closed the distance between them and kissed him back.

She pressed her hands against his chest, marveling at the heated hardness of him, burrowing into the shoulder openings and pushing the suit jacket off him.

He shrugged it off, as her dress loosened at the back, wondering when he’d dropped the zipper. Then she lost her train of thought, the dress a memory as it pooled at her feet, and she stepped out of it.

He walked her toward his bed, dueling with her tongue, controlling the kiss as he drew his thumbs along her neck to her collarbone. She groaned as he cupped his palm over her sheerly clad breast. She moaned as he broke their kiss and began to leave a trail of kisses and nips along her jaw, around to the sensitive spot below her ear, as he gently rolled her hard nipple between his fingers.

She wanted to claw his clothes off, feel his skin against hers. She was still clutching his head as he lowered his head, replacing his fingers with his mouth. The combination of the damp heat and the textured silk of her bra created an exquisite friction that had her climbing a peak without any further stimulation.

She pushed her hips forward, seeking that sweet, hard bulge she'd felt moments before, but which his current position prevented her from having. Dammit, she wanted it all. His mouth on her, the hard length of him between her legs, buried deep inside of her. She was all but coming apart at the seams as he continued to drive her wild. Suddenly, her bra was gone, her breasts spilling out. The panties went next until she was as naked as he was clothed.

She dragged his mouth back to hers so he could press his hips into hers again, and groaned in deep satisfaction when he pinned her tightly to the mattress in a power move. He slid his hands down her sides, over her hips, pulling at her thighs, urging her to wrap her legs around him as he once again took her mouth with his in a soul-deep kiss.

The instant she lifted one leg up over his hip so he could sink the full weight and length of him against her, she climaxed hard. The strength of it stunned her, robbing her of breath, but he just kept up just the right amount of sweet pressure so she could wring every last pulsing bit of pleasure from the contact. Breathless as he nibbled the side of her neck, she had no idea what to say as the reality of what she was doing began to crash back in.

“Aleksei—”

“Shh,” he instructed, taking her mouth again, only this time in a kiss so gentle, it seduced her all over again.

She was powerless against this, against him. It was too good, and he was impossible to push away. Especially when she didn't really want it to end. She shut out thoughts of her job, duty, and repercussions. She was in this for his inside information and God help her, she wanted to protect him against any threat from his own people.

She stared up at him, his expression fierce, along with his tight jaw and those hot, gray eyes, darker, like storm clouds, flashing with lightning. He stood, removing his shirt, reaching for the buckle of his pants and undoing it in one smooth move. Everything about Aleksei was smooth. He pushed his pants and underwear off, his erection jutting out, thick and hard.

Her eyes went down his powerful body. Hidden by his clothes, she had no idea he was so beautiful, so built.

And to her utter alarm, that quickly, that easily, her desire for him blazed like a bright internal flame.

He brought his hands down next to her hips and lowered his head to scatter more of those soft, tantalizing kisses along her belly, her ribs, to her swollen, aching breasts. She threaded her fingers through his silky hair, the length coupled with that stubble on his face making him look like a pirate. He dipped his head and laved her nipple with his tongue, then drew the tip deep into his mouth and sucked while one of his hands cupped her other breast and his fingers plucked at the other hard peak.

His lips continued their upward journey. His tongue slid across her collarbone, and he nibbled at her shoulder before nudging her chin up so he could nuzzle and kiss her neck. He lowered his hips to hers, and she felt the head of his shaft glide along her aching flesh, then prod the entrance to her body, just enough to tease her, but not fully penetrate.

His chest brushed across her tender nipples as he settled more fully over her, his arms now braced next to her shoulders. The feel of his naked body on hers felt so right, so warm, like a craving that wouldn't go away.

“You're protected, Harley?”

“Yes.”

His mouth reached her ear, and he was breathing hard and fast. “Fuck, I want you. God help me, I've wanted you since—” he said raggedly, as if she was something he'd never be able to have. Not in the way that mattered the most. “I'm sorry it's under these circumstances.” He dropped any pretense of subterfuge, and there was pain in his eyes that twisted her heart.

“It's just us, Aleksei,” she whispered. “Fully committed to what we know needs to be done.” She cupped his face as his chest expanded with her words. “I want you too.”

His eyes darkened as he oh-so-slowly pushed into her, his gaze turning hot and hungry as her body closed tightly around him. He pulled out of her slightly, dragging the length of his cock against her still-sensitive flesh, as if he was trying to make the moment and the pleasure last. He groaned and shuddered, then thrust back in, harder and deeper this time, causing her to gasp and arch beneath him.

And still, it wasn't enough. She wrapped her legs around the back of his thighs, urging him deeper. “Please, Alek,” she murmured huskily. “I want all of you.” She wanted everything he had to give—physically and emotionally. Her emotions jumbled into too many feelings wrapped up in her job and in

her heart.

With a low, rumbling growl that reverberated in his chest, he sank back in, withdrew, and surged back again, his strokes lengthening, his pumping gaining momentum. Gone were any attempts to hold back. Instead, his thrusts grew urgent and demanding, and wholly primal. Friction, pressure, and heat fused together in a tangle of sensation until her entire being focused on the connection of their bodies and the impatient, restless need swelling in her.

Framing her face in his hands, he seized her mouth with his, as if his next breath of air could only come from her. His kiss was deep and rapacious, and laced with a desperate kind of passion she could taste with each sweep of his tongue and feel in the aggressive way he possessed her body.

She slid her arms around him, flattened her hands on the firm, flexing muscles along his back, and held on for the tumultuous ride. Before long, he dragged his mouth from hers and stared down at her, his breath shallow as his climax washed over him, through him. Eyes closed, he tossed his head back and arched against her hips, a helpless groan ripping from his throat as his flesh pulsed hot and hard inside of her and she shuddered from the sheer force of his release.

When it was over, he collapsed on top of her, burying his face in the crook of her neck while his heart beat strong and steady against her breast. She closed her eyes and held him close, reveling in the quiet, tender moment while it lasted, and how perfect and right it felt being with Aleksei.

He hadn't been playacting, and her heart hurt from the pain of knowing that nothing could come of this stunning moment. They were combatants, as far and as opposite as humanly possible. They couldn't even be friends, let alone build a relationship between them.

His voice rasped out, "Tell Isabelle that they know about Regina Braithwaite. MI6 has been compromised somewhere, and Daan Jensen. They both are in terrible danger. Without them, you can't build a case against the Olenskas. Act quickly or they will be murdered."

She turned her head, his eyes stark and beautiful. "If they know about you telling—"

"I'm a dead man. You've got to go, my angel *mysh*."

THE SOFT, needy sound Bree made in the back of her throat, combined with the provocative way she rolled her hips against his groin, had his blood roaring in his ears and pure, unadulterated lust surging through Blitz's body. Talk about a rush through his line of defense.

That easily, she pushed him into these illegal motions. And now that he'd let go, he'd lost the ability to slow down or stop. He couldn't stop, not even if his life depended on it or she changed her mind. At the moment, his life depended on kissing her, touching her, feeling her hot and wet around him.

This might be the worst and best position he'd been in for a long time. On the one hand, it wasn't prudent to mix business and pleasure in such an uncertain and temporary world they both inhabited at the moment. One that was fraught with so much danger and went against all his common sense in the matter. But contrary to his thoughts, it was good to have someone in this mad world who not only understood everything they were forced to endure, but someone he could hold onto, bond with, and experience the fullness of a kind of passion that he'd never felt before.

This was all about heat and desire, and he couldn't fight it anymore. On the other hand, he finally had Bree West right where he wanted her, hot and bothered and all over him.

"Bree, tell me you're protected?"

"Yes. I'm good."

Giving in and surrendering was foreign to him. When he took a stance and decided on something, he never quit. But although giving in to Bree was a very bad idea, he had thought—expected—the reality would be a letdown

compared to the fantasy. Instead, she was so incredibly brave, sweet, and intensely defensive, he'd let this get much further than he'd intended. Which had only made him want more. Damn, he wanted more.

And more was what she was giving him.

Bree's body was more hard than soft, which hadn't surprised him. What had been a surprise was how swiftly he'd responded to her taut, toned lines. She was both grace and power, and he'd wanted badly to learn more of what all that grace and power would feel like, wrapped around him. And then there was the incongruous, almost voluptuous softness to her lips and her even softer sighs. He usually liked his women soft all over, but, as it turned out, the combination of a strong, lean body and soft lips was all kinds of enticing.

Her heady, feminine scent seemed to be everywhere and infused every breath he managed to inhale. He could feel her breasts, warm and yielding against his chest, as her lips were beneath his ravenous, greedy, demanding mouth.

Keeping his mouth on hers, he slid his hands around to her ass and pulled her closer, fitting the hard ridge of his cock between her thighs. He groaned when she rocked sinuously against his thick, aching shaft. His hand traveled from her firm butt to the enticing bow tie at the small of her back. With one tug, the bodice of her dress loosened, and he peeled away the flimsy fabric covering her. Her breasts spilled out, full and firm and crowned with dark pink aureoles. He cupped the heavy delicious weight of them in his palms and scraped his thumbs across the rigid nipples, reveling in the soft warmth of her bare skin, the catch of her breath in the back of her throat, and how amazingly responsive she was to his touch.

Dipping his head, he took one of her nipples into his mouth, rasping his tongue against the pebble-hard tip, licking, nipping, laving until the peak was swollen and damp from his attention. She shivered and exhaled a breathy sound that shot straight to his already rigid cock, writhing wildly beneath him. She reached down to his waistband, but he wasn't ready for that yet. He gathered her hands in his and pulled them behind her, arching her back and allowing him to take more of her nipple into the wet heat of his mouth. At the first suctioning pull of his lips, she pressed her hips harder, closer, forcing him to take her deeper.

Her thighs tightened on either side of his hips as he moved to her other breast, slipping his hand beneath the hem of her gown and smoothing his palm up her thigh, until he reached the fabric of her panties. She was so wet

and aroused. He worked his fingers beneath the elastic band so he could touch her intimately.

Instantly, his thumb glided through to her clit, and he caressed her with slow, unhurried strokes meant to tease and build the tension cresting higher and higher, hotter and hotter. One finger, then two, pushed deep inside of her and that quickly, that easily, the tremors throbbed over his fingers.

She whimpered helplessly and moaned incoherently. Her hands immobilized as her hips began to move in time to the circling pressure of his thumb, and the driving force of his fingers impaling her.

Giving in to the unstoppable urge to watch Bree as she climaxed, he lifted his head and stared at her face. Her eyes were dark and filled with desire, her skin flushed with excitement all the way down to her heaving breasts. Her inner muscles fluttered around his fingers, and she tossed her head back, her lips parting on a shocked gasp of breath as the force of her orgasm ripped through her. With his name tumbling from her lips, she shattered completely.

When it was over, he released her hands. He needed to get inside her, now, and it was that urgent, desperate thought that drove him to reach down to free himself. She was right there with him, needing no urging. She lifted up onto her knees, and with his hands on her hips, she hiked up her dress. He jerked her down on top of him. She met him with a push of her own, grinding on him, glorying in the long groan of satisfaction he wrenched from her as she clenched her still-twitching muscles tightly around him. Unable to wait another moment to fuck her, he thrust. Their eyes met and held, hers filled with dark desire, and he watched as she gasped and arched into him as he drove himself to the hilt.

She was snug around him, slick like wet satin, gripping his shaft, and it was an intensely erotic sensation that made his head spin.

Her bare breasts were crushed against his chest, her knees bracketed his hips, and the urge to possess her in the most elemental way possible overwhelmed him. Tangling his fingers in Bree's soft, thick hair, he held her head in his hands and slanted his mouth across hers in a hot, deep kiss.

Her hands slid to his shoulders, and her fingers dug into his muscles as he surged in her, again and again, tearing a moan from the back of her throat. His strokes became faster, longer, ruthlessly demanding and a whole lot more primal. With each thrust he felt himself grow harder, thicker, until lust and need collided into white-hot heat and an all-consuming pleasure that

threatened to engulf him.

Lost in the rush of sensation, lost in her, he wrenched his mouth from hers, tossed his head back in pure ecstasy, and arched into her one last time, high and hard and infinitely deep. A guttural growl tore from his chest, and his entire body shuddered as he came, harder and stronger than he ever had in his life.

His scorching release seemed to go on and on, wringing him dry and leaving him weak and devastated. He buried his face against her neck, and as he gradually recovered, he turned, pressing her to her back on the bed.

She clutched his weight against her for several minutes. When he moved off her, he settled to his side. She was lying next to him on her back, just the way he'd left her, with her head turned slightly away from him, eyes closed. He didn't blame her. He needed a few private moments to recover from what had just happened between them. Her face was flushed, her breathing still choppy, and she'd draped one arm over her exposed breasts in a sweet show of modesty. Her stomach was bare, the pretty dress hiked around her hips.

Finally, her lashes fluttered open, and she slowly glanced his way. Her gaze was guarded, and her expression was tentative, even a bit uncertain. She looked so damn vulnerable, and that was a term he didn't easily equate with Bree. No, she was always up for a challenge.

But this Bree staring at him had the ability to cripple his emotions and make him care. Because at the moment he had the strong urge to reach out and touch her, gently this time. To smooth away the silky strands of hair that had fallen across her soft cheek. To lean down and kiss her slowly, leisurely, and make love to her in heart-crushing slowness.

"You can relax, Blitz.

"Relax about what?" She lifted her chin, showing him that gutsy, indomitable spirit that never failed to impress him.

"We both know what this situation is and what it isn't."

"And what is it?"

"Temporary. Neither one of us is going to change our jobs or our lives. You are in the SEALs for the long haul. I understand that fully. I'm working toward getting ahead in the FBI. I have my sights set on being the director." Lifting up on one elbow, she eyed him curiously. "No emotional ties, right?" she murmured, more to herself than to him. "You like to play it safe."

It both amazed him and annoyed him how effortlessly she'd nailed his MO, when he was normally very guarded when it came to the opposite sex. It

was an unsettling feeling knowing that Bree could get into his head so easily, and it made him realize how important it was that she understood his personal rules when it came to women and relationships.

He sighed. “Other than this situation, I’m straight up with women about what to expect because I don’t want anyone to get hurt when things change.”

“What happened that made you so jaded?” she asked, her gentle, caring voice reaching out to him like a physical caress.

He ignored the sensation, as well as the all-too-knowing tenderness that softened her features and seemed to see past all those internal barriers he’d erected long ago. “I’m not jaded,” he said, but knew that denial was a lie. He’d learned from Amy what heartache really was, and he didn’t want to go through that again, especially when he knew a relationship that was forged in this environment couldn’t go anywhere. When he did settle down, it would be a sure fucking bet the woman wasn’t going to walk away from him and leave his heart in tatters. “You’re as aware as I am that there isn’t any room in our lives for commitments and promises.” He went on before she could dig any deeper into the depths of his mind and heart. “Our jobs come first. We both are subject to the whims of our employers. Your bosses are in DC, mine are in Coronado.” He shrugged. “There’s the distance to contend with, especially when it stands to reason that we both could be gone for months. It’s just not feasible or smart.”

His dark, matter-of-fact tone didn't seem to faze her. “No, it’s not smart,” she agreed. “Don’t set yourself up for heartache.” She raised a dark brow, highlighting her knowing gaze. “A fool’s errand.”

His jaw tightened in growing aggravation, and he took a deep breath, wondering how in the hell this one woman could push all his hot buttons. She had him tied up in knots on so many levels. Emotionally. Physically. Sexually. All because he wanted to find out who she was and needed her soft and naked beneath him, in a variety of ways. Why couldn’t she be the kind of woman he could just fuck, get out of his system, and forget?

But he instinctively knew there would be no forgetting Bree West, not in the next five minutes or hell, even the coming months. He suddenly felt hollow at the thought of the end of this mission, even though what they were trying to do was so important.

“So, we understand each other. This is just temporary, deployment sex.” She rose and wiggled out of her dress and panties, then completely naked, she reached out and tugged at the shirt loosened by his open pants, pulling it over

his head. “We have a seventy-two-hour reprieve before we’re back at it. Let’s take advantage of that before we get spun up again.”

His breathing ragged, he met her gaze. “You’re halfway to convincing me.”

She giggled softly. “You playing hard to get?” She cupped his growing erection. “Hmm, kind of hard to hide it.”

“Yeah, us guys are an open book.”

She brazenly slid inside his boxer briefs to stroke the hard length of his erection in her palm.

His dick swelled and thickened in her grasp, and he groaned deep in his throat.

Her lips parted at his response, and she leaned into him, pressing her breasts against his chest and nuzzling her warm, moist lips along his neck as her hand delved deeper between his thighs, until she was gently squeezing and fondling his balls.

His gut clenched, and unable to help himself, he splayed his palms on her ass, cupping her smooth taut skin.

She released a hot gust of breath in his ear at the same time she grazed the head of his shaft with her thumb. Lust and need ripped through him, and it took every ounce of restraint he possessed not to ravage her hard, fast, and deep.

She nibbled on the lobe of his ear then touched her wet tongue to his sensitive skin. “I want to go down on you,” she whispered. “I want to lick you, and taste you, and take you deep inside my mouth.”

He almost came right then. “Yes,” he rasped, barely recognizing that scratchy voice as his own.

She pressed her mouth to his neck, breathing deep, then kissing up to his jaw, rubbing her lips over his mouth, then his stubble, before she bit him. His chest rose and fell heavily, feeling fierce and hungry all over again. He closed his eyes as the soft press of her lips moved down to his chest, her mouth taking his taut nipples, sucking and biting him. “You are so beautiful, Callen,” she murmured. “I want to see all of your magnificent body.” Without warning, she gripped the waistband of his pants and briefs and pulled them both down his thighs, and off him, completely freeing his throbbing shaft.

She stared at his erection in awe and fascination, her fingers caressing his length with a light brush, a tantalizing tease that had him gritting his teeth as

his dick swelled, growing hard to the point of pain. “So beautiful,” she breathed. Then she blinked and frowned.

She reached out and touched the bullet wound, a healed disk just above his Adonis belt. She sighed and looked at him and her emotions were in those amber eyes—admiration, tribute, and acknowledgment of his heroism. But he hadn't been the hero in Syria two years ago. That had been Gator and Isabelle. Her gaze slid down over his hip to the other healed scar on his upper thigh. Flattening her hands on his thighs, she slid her palms upward. Her fingers traced the scar on his left leg, then moved higher, until her thumbs brushed across the heavy sacks beneath his dick, until the fingers of one hand were wrapped snugly around the base of his heated flesh.

Her eyes traveled slowly up the length of his torso, watched the rapid rise and fall of his chest, and finally met his gaze. Her eyes were dark, intense, and hypnotic. When she stroked him all the way to the tip of his cock then glided her thumb over the swollen head, he shuddered and jolted against her arousing caress.

Leaning forward, she oh-so-slowly swept his dick with her tongue from his balls to the base of his shaft, all the way up to the sensitive tip. Made a soft eager sound for more, then took him, all of him, into the silken heat of the incredibly sweet mouth of hers.

White-hot sensations jolted through him at the arousing sight of her giving him head. She pulled him in deep, then withdrew with a delicate swirl of her tongue and just enough suction to make him break out in a cold sweat. She worked him over hard, wrenching guttural moans from him as every muscle in his body tensed.

Her lips continued to slide up and down his length, each time taking him a little deeper, sucking him a little harder, stroking him a little faster, and ultimately driving him straight to the edge of insanity.

Knowing he was on the verge of coming, and wanting to be inside of her when he did, he gently grasped her under the arms and pulled her onto her back with a twist of his body with a low, needy growl.

Her eyes widened in surprise at his powerful, dominant move, and before she could object, he dropped his mouth over hers and thrust his tongue deep. In response, she slid her hands up his chest to his shoulders, tracing the sinewy contours of his arms, the biceps that were taut from strain.

Her beautiful face was flushed, her eyes a dark, enticing shade of whiskey, her expression showing her fierce desire.

A sense of urgency spurred him on. Still kissing her, he pressed his hands to her knees, and shoved her legs wide apart, skimming his hand up her supple thigh.

He wanted to make sure she was ready for him. Wanted to make sure she was just as ramped up as he was. But as he reached the core of her, he found her slick, already turned on from going down on him and that thought inflamed him even more.

Without hesitation, he pushed a finger deep inside her and stroked his thumb over her clit, and she moaned against his mouth. A second finger followed, and her hips arched against his hand and her legs curled around the back of his thighs in a desperate attempt to pull him closer. He increased the friction of his fingers—sliding, gliding, stroking, inside and out, letting the pleasure build until her entire body tensed, then shuddered as she climaxed.

He lifted his mouth from hers, breathing hard and fast. “Goddamn, Bree. I’m dying for you.”

“Callen, please,” she whispered, reaching out and clasping his dick, guiding him to her. “Please.”

Slowly, inch by excruciating inch, he shoved into her until he was buried inside of her to the hilt. She grabbed onto his forearms, arching into him. Her eyes closed on an aching groan of pleasure.

A ragged breath sighed out of him at the sight of her contorted face. The fit of his dick inside her was tight and deep. He pressed his mouth to her neck, scattering damp kisses along her throat, finding her nipple before sucking it deep inside his mouth. She clutched his head and arched, offering herself up to him while meeting his pistoning hips, harder, faster.

Desperate to come, he lifted his head and fitted his mouth to hers, his tongue claiming hers in a deep, wet kiss. He gripped her hips, using the powerful muscles in his hips, thighs, and butt as leverage while he thrust into her harder, pumped faster, deeper. The heat inside grew unbearable.

Her inner muscles tightened spasmodically around his thick, aching cock as she climaxed hard, crying out against his mouth, allowing him to finally let go of his restraint. His own scalding release rolled over him with blinding pleasure.

When the tremors subsided, he rolled and wrapped her into his arms and buried his face against her damp neck, his emotions in a tangled mess. “Bree,” he whispered, her name soft and the essence of her filling him to bursting.

She wound her fingers into his hair and settled her body against his. “Say my name like that again,” she murmured, pressing her mouth to his.

“Bree,” he whispered again against the sweet press of her lips on his.

* * *

HARLEY WALKED into Isabelle’s office, trying with all her might to forget about what happened between Aleksei and her last night. It was over. It was playacting, she told herself, and couldn’t be repeated. She had expected to feel a certain amount of turmoil concerning her night of lovemaking with Aleksei. Yet she could find no regrets, no recriminations. *It had been wonderful.*

Isabelle was behind her desk and her expression told Harley immediately that whatever news she’d received wasn’t good. In fact, it looked about as bad as it could get. Gator stood next to her, his hand on her shoulder squeezing.

“Izzy?” Harley said, breaking into their intimate moment.

Isabelle bit her lip and sighed. She bent her head and dragged her hand across her eyes, then inhaled raggedly. “Regina Brathwaite was murdered last night at the MI6 safehouse.”

Harley’s breath suddenly wouldn’t come. “Oh, God. Her family?”

“Spared,” Isabelle said, bitterly, swallowing hard.

Gator crouched down and took her hand, his eyes sad. “That’s not all,” he said.

“Daan Jensen.” It wasn’t a leap. Of course, they got to him, too.

“Yeah, he hung himself in his cell, but we know it wasn’t suicide.”

“It was a hit.” *Aleksei.* His warning came too late. *He will be devastated.* She wished she could spare him this news.

Isabelle’s phone rang, but she didn’t reach for it. Gator rose and grabbed the receiver. He listened and his face went blank. He hung up the phone slowly.

“What is it?” Harley asked. Isabelle gripped his forearm.

“Aleksei Volkov—”

“Oh, God,” she blurted, unable to control her sudden fear. Her stomach knotted with dread. “Don’t tell me he’s dead, too.” Her dread turned to panic.

“No. Ah—he’s—ah downstairs at reception. He said he’s here for his

breakfast with Isabelle.”

Harley breathed a rush of relief, chastising herself. She never panicked. Ever. But the thought of the world without Aleksei...she couldn't go there.

Isabelle stood abruptly, her face composed into a calm mask of her station. She was every inch the ambassador, her grief hidden. “Harley, go to the kitchen and set something up immediately. Hurry. We don't know who's watching. Tell them it was a communication error.”

Harley bolted out of the room and made a beeline for dining services. She relayed Isabelle's request and the staff moved into action. She supervised as they brought a table into the atrium and set it with a small vase and flowers, utensils, and a coffee pot. She was sliding in the chairs when Isabelle and Aleksei walked into the room. The atrium was Isabelle's private area for her meetings. She found that the greenery put people at ease. It was routinely checked for bugs.

She swore she could feel him when he entered the room. She looked up and their eyes collided. She felt suddenly and shamefully breathless, remembering that hard body and those soft lips. Aleksei was dressed in an elegant double-breasted gray silk suit with a light blue shirt and a gray tie. So handsome, yet rough around the edges, like a panther who had been domesticated, always with a shadow of his hidden self nearby, the air of danger lingering around him. His Russian lineage was strong in his face, and she snapped out of it.

He was still the Russian ambassador.

Still the enemy. But what a gorgeous enemy.

He crossed the room to her, closing the space between them to little more than a deep breath. His lashes drifted down, thick and black. “Miss Quill,” he said, his voice dark and smoky like his eyes. He took her hand and kissed the back, his lips lingering. Her pulse jumped.

She backed up a few steps, breathing deep of the sweet, dew-damp scents of the garden—flowers and sweet olive and boxwood—green, vibrant scents of life. As if she could scrub away the feeling of despair that clung to her, she rubbed her bare arms, a chill pebbling her flesh with goose bumps.

He waited until Isabelle was seated, his gaze flicking to Gator. “Your shadow looks like he wants to rip my head off,” he said.

“He's as upset as we all are.”

Aleksei swore in Russian and rose abruptly, pacing, his eyes cold, his face set in a stony mask. He impatiently unbuttoned his suit coat, running his

hands through his hair. “My warning—”

“Was too late,” Gator bit out.

He came back to the table. His face was set. “There is only one choice left.” He took a breath. Harley could feel the tension, brittle in the air around him, snapping with electricity. “I have solid and irrefutable proof that Leonid, Uri, and Anya Olenska with the collusion of AAL and a government official high in the Kremlin conspired to murder your ambassador and his family. I will turn this information over to you on one condition.”

“This government official?” Isabelle asked as Harley stood there in disbelief.

Aleksei’s face contorted in shame and anger, his gray eyes dark and stormy. “He’s my father, the Minister of Foreign Affairs.”

Isabelle took a hard breath and turned to look at Gator. His mouth tightened. “Son of a bitch,” he said, low and menacing.

“The condition?” Isabelle asked, her voice hard.

“You get my mother and sister out of Moscow, and I’ll give you everything I have.” Harley’s gut clenched. His gaze flicked up to her then back to Isabelle. “I know you wanted to turn me, Isabelle, but I’m not interested in becoming a spy for you against Russia.”

“What is it you want?” Isabelle said, her voice strained.

“I want out completely. I can no longer serve a government bent on evil. I want to defect to the United States. I’m asking for asylum.”

FROM A YOUNG AGE Aleksei had been taught that he was Russian royalty of sorts. That his dad was a mover and shaker in the Kremlin. As he got older, he saw his father for exactly what he was—an unpleasant and evil man. His father had been a minor player when the Soviet Union fell ten years before Aleksei’s birth and broke up into independent states. As a result of the fall, his father was bitter about how the politics had been handled, on a world stage no less, and opposed to democratization. He seethed deep inside at the changes. He grew to hate the United States for their part in destroying the very fabric of communism and actively looked for ways to undermine the Americans.

“Excuse me for a moment.”

Aleksei watched as Isabelle left the room with Gator. The SEAL didn’t trust him, and Aleksei couldn’t blame him. But Isabelle did. He sighed softly. Isabelle had always been on his side, and she was the reason he’d re-evaluated everything.

Back then, full of himself, a womanizer, indulgent, and spoiled, she’d taught him what being a man was all about and how he had a responsibility to live up to his potential, something no one in his family had ever forced him to face.

He loved her. Their relationship had been volatile and passionate, but ultimately, she had made it clear that she couldn’t be with him permanently because she was going into public service, seeking an ambassadorship. For the first time in his life, he discovered humility and gratitude, and how he had been wasting his life. She had opened his eyes to so much, but he would

always be grateful for his introduction to Abraham Lincoln.

Then there was Harley. All he could do was look at her. She was so beautiful. She'd knocked him senseless the first time he'd seen her, and he'd never really recovered—her dark, silky hair, the shape of her eyebrows, the delicate planes of her face, the clear, sun-shot gray of her eyes. Her mouth. God, what she could do to him with her mouth.

He couldn't think about her without getting aroused, without remembering how she'd been beneath him last night, how his heart had been engaged all those months ago in DC. He tried to get rid of the feeling, knowing that compromising a CIA agent would result in her arrest and incarceration for treason. But no matter how much he worked at forgetting, she was a glow on his heart. Last night was painful and wonderful. But even then, he'd kept his secrets.

He'd thought losing a future with Isabelle would leave him bereft without her, without her counsel and, more importantly, without her friendship. But he'd underestimated her, and throughout the years, they had become very close friends under the radar.

Isabelle was protective and fierce about him keeping his hands off Harley. He wanted to honor her wishes, but Harley was too much of a temptation for him. Their conversation, during that harrowing experience, had been full of understanding and attraction. He'd had a boner for her ever since.

He closed his eyes weary beyond measure, deep in his bones tired of hiding who he was and working to promote what he was fundamentally against. He'd watched his homeland succumb to greed, brutality, and a single-minded quest for power.

He'd made the decision his conscience dictated. His father had conspired to kill a foreign ambassador, going against rules the two superpowers had always respected. Ambassadors were sacrosanct. West Africa had lost a staunch ally and the United States a brilliant statesman.

“Why didn't you tell me last night that you had this information?” Harley asked.

“I was hoping I wouldn't have to use it and put my mother and sister in danger. I was going to defect regardless. I couldn't live another moment with myself or serve a government that is propped up by an evil state-within-a-state. My country will never be a responsible member of the community of nations until its security services are destroyed. The Soviet Union died over

forty years ago, but the brutal and oppressive security system that jails and kills domestic opposition and engages in relentless political warfare against the West lives on. The president could cease to exist, but the KGB state endures. Olenska is part of that. He and his son and daughter fractured and created the Z Militia. They all disgust me.”

Harley’s phone rang and she answered. She listened for a few moments and then hung up. “Isabelle wants us to move to the conference room. She’ll be with us shortly.” Her voice was cool. She was irritated with him. Well, better than having the US put a hit out on him and contracting her to do it. He was on the verge of being a hunted man.

He rose. “If I hadn’t already decided to betray my country to save my country, I would have become your spy, Harley.” *More.* He thought. They would have been more. He would have seduced her because he wanted her and she wanted him, too. Seduction. Real seduction was still on the table as far as he was concerned.

Fuck protocols.

Her stare was legendary and unnerving. She turned on her heel and walked away, the definite little click, click showing her pique. He followed her as somewhat of a job since she didn’t even slow down for him. “Harley,” he called, but she took the stairs without a backward glance. He increased his pace to catch up to her. When he rounded the upper hall, she was waiting, coolly, her arms folded and looking straight ahead.

“*Malen'kiy mysk,*” he said.

She turned on her clicky heels and smoothly, swiftly marched down the hallway to a door. Not even waiting for him before going inside. He had to catch the door from closing in his face.

Inside, she set her phone on the table and rounded on him. “I’m not your little mouse and this isn’t a game.”

“I know this isn’t a game,” he said through clenched teeth. “Nothing that’s happened has anything to do with playing you.”

She got right up into his face. “Oh, really. You want to work with me? Yet you keep vital information from me.”

Aleksei just stood there, absorbing the fireworks in full explosive action. It was something to witness. “Are you armed?”

His question caught her off guard if the sudden confused look on her face was any indication. “When necessary.”

“Now?”

She frowned. “No, not now. Why?”

“Because I don’t want to get shot or stabbed when I tell you that you’re really amazing all the time, but when you get angry, really angry, you put the fire in firecracker in a way that is absolutely breathtaking.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t need physical weapons to hurt someone.”

You are so fucking crazy, he told himself, even as he reached out and slipped his arms around her and pressed her against the wall. It was crazy to kiss her after making her so mad and risking her ire even more. “I will point out that you were *working me, mysK*.”

“I never said I was CIA.”

He scoffed. “I never said I didn’t want you for real.”

There went that crazy again. He still wanted to kiss her after confessing how much he wanted her. He had the high ground here. He had something the Americans wanted badly. The Olenskas and his father on a platter. But perversely he didn’t want to lose Harley over politics, stupid CIA protocols, or spycraft. Even though he knew it was a doomed relationship, he still wanted her. The low ache in his body could only be relieved by getting close to her again. He wanted inside her with no second agendas between them.

He pressed into her until her hips came up against his. Then he backed her up against the wall, and all thoughts of advantages, tactical or otherwise, disappeared. He held her stormy, gray-eyed gaze, and heat coiled low in his belly. He let his gaze drift over her face, memorizing every curve. When his attention settled on her mouth, she knew it. He felt her soften and heard the slight intake of her breath. Whatever else was going on between them, however angry she’d been with him before, she wanted his kiss as much as he wanted hers.

Well, she could have him any way she wanted him, and if she ran out of ideas, he had enough for both of them.

Pulling her even closer, tighter to him, he lowered his head and took her mouth, slanting his lips across hers and seeking entrance with his tongue. Her response was immediate, a soft gasp of pleasure, and he took the kiss home, slipping inside and finding his own piece of heaven. She was so sweet.

Her hands came up around his neck, her fingers tangling through his hair, and he opened his mouth wider, taking more of her. She moved against him, her breasts pressing into his chest, her mouth angling over his and creating a brief moment of suction, and as quickly as that, heat shot to his groin. He felt his control slip, a quick jerk of it out from under him.

Her kiss was enough to undo him, and he wanted to undo her.

He got his hands under her shirt, one smooth sweep of his palms up to her bra, and for a second, she stopped breathing. He rubbed his thumbs across her nipples, making them hard and enjoying the wonderful soft weight of her breasts in his hands and the amazing texture of lace over silken skin. She groaned in his mouth. The sound shot through him like wildfire. Nothing had ever felt more right.

He knew lust, and it was running hot through his veins, but there was something more. Something beyond the burning ache he felt for her. Something fiercer, with an edge of desperation he was trying to ignore and could barely comprehend. If it was love, there would be so many obstacles. If it wasn't, then why was he so desperate?

Suddenly, she was pushing at him with both hands flat against his chest. When he stepped back, she ducked under his arms and started to tuck her shirt back in. "You are unbelievable. In the embassy? I can't do this."

"Do what?"

She waved a hand between them. "This." She started to straighten her clothes.

"Let me help. I'm responsible for getting you into trouble."

"I wasn't exactly protesting," she said, tugging at her shirt.

"It's a crime to cover you up." He sighed, his hands entwining with hers.

"Please." She untangled his hands. "There are a lot of crimes here."

"I think I'll always be starved for you." He was kissing her again and she was responding, then suddenly she pushed him away and shook her head.

"I swear, I have no restraint around you. It's crazy." Her cell phone rang, and she flung herself toward it. Snatching it up, she answered. "Yes, ma'am," she said, then hung up. "They're on their way. No more unprofessional behavior."

The door opened and Isabelle, a woman with auburn hair, and Gator came through.

"Aleksi, this is Katherine Cross. She's heading up the Ogden investigation."

He nodded to her. "Miss Cross."

"Mrs., actually, but you can just call me Kat."

He took a seat next to Harley, who picked up the remote in the room and clicked it. A woman's face appeared. She was seated at a desk and in the background was a view that included the Washington Monument.

“Mr. Volkov,” the woman said in greeting. “I’m Marion Welter, a state department representative. I’m here to discuss your request.”

“I am grateful for your consideration and please, it’s Aleksei.”

“Marion, then. We’re the ones who are grateful. It is our primary goal to bring the people who murdered the ambassador and his family to justice. It’s imperative. After what Isabelle told me, I am floored that your father is involved.”

“My father hates the West, Marion, and always has. He’s not my role model or who I aspire to be. That is why I’m here.”

She sighed. “On that matter, the Secretary of State is committed to getting your mother and sister out of Moscow, but we need the intelligence you hold first.”

“Forgive me. I cannot comply. As soon as I release this information, I run the risk that it would leak to Leonid. He will kill my family.” His hands curled into white-knuckled fists in his lap. “I must insist that you get them out immediately. As soon as they are safe, I will give you the information you want.”

Marion’s eyebrows lifted. “I certainly understand your position.”

“The moment you extract my mother and sister, they will know I’m defecting. They will come after us. I hold other secrets and information that could be vital to your country. I have my own contingency plans, but I need some assurances—”

“We will protect you.”

He nodded. He was going to need it. He might be good with fencing and firearms, but he wasn’t trained as a spy or a special operator. “I require Ms. Quill as my bodyguard.”

Marion looked at Isabelle. “That will be up to Kat and the ambassador.” He caught Harley’s wary gaze from the corner of his eye. He wanted her close to him, and he suspected she was quite capable of guarding him and his body. “Thank you for risking so much to do the right thing, Aleksei.”

The screen went blank.

He turned toward Isabelle. “It’s nonnegotiable.”

Her mouth twisted. She looked at Harley, but the woman gave nothing away. “Okay, Aleksei. We’ll set up an op to get your mother and sister out of Russia. We’ll need your cooperation to plan this.”

He was satisfied with this outcome. His family would be secured, and he’d have Harley to protect him. It was going to take the might of the

Americans to foil the Olenskaskas. They might think they knew what they were up against, but they didn't. Not by a long shot. When he made the decision to defect, he knew that he would be risking his life, but with the evidence he'd collected against the Olenskaskas, he was well aware that even his loved ones would be targeted for death, and in the Olenskaskas' eyes, he was a dead man walking.

* * *

BREE STIRRED the next morning before the alarm went off, her body sated and her mind clear of the worries she'd had yesterday before she'd tussled with Blitz. And what a delicious tussle it had been. All she could do was think, wow, the man was just as good in bed as he looked like he would be out of it. *Wow.*

She stared out into her apartment, which looked the same but felt so different with the warmth and hardness of his body curled around hers, her breathing synchronized to the even rise and fall of his chest. Shaking off the last dregs of sleep, she absorbed the feel of him against her and the rhythm of his breathing for a moment. Normally, she didn't lay around in bed. She was up, doing her workout, getting a shower, and heading out for the day, but they had been given a reprieve from the constant missions. How long that would really last was anyone's guess, so a few minutes enjoying the man who she had fucked hard for most of the night was a luxury she was going to snatch, a man she had fantasized about for almost the length of time she'd been deployed to the embassy in Niger.

Careful not to disturb him, she fumbled for the off button on the alarm and eased up. She raked her hair back from her face, then leaned against the headboard, a strange kind of protectiveness unfolding in her as she gazed down at him, sleeping so peacefully.

He had shifted to his back, one arm sprawled above his head, his palm open and vulnerable, the other hand at his waist, looking big and capable with those well-formed, long fingers. The sheet was pushed down just past that delicious Adonis belt, the light playing across his wide chest and beautiful abs, all of him curved with nothing but sexy muscle. The strong angle of his jaw was accentuated by a stubble of beard, the burnished skin across his cheekbones drawn smooth. So handsome.

Unable to stop herself, she combed her fingers through the chocolate thickness of his hair, gently drawing it back from his forehead. Absently fingering the silky texture of Blitz's hair, she stared off into space, aware of his soft breathing, her thoughts weirdly shifting to her mom. Maybe it was because Blitz served in the armed forces or maybe it was just a random thought. But she often thought of her mom with her dad, how they had been so young when her mom had gotten pregnant with her at sixteen, how her father had never faltered, and the often-blurred memories of him.

"What are you thinking about?"

Attuned as she was to his every breath, Bree hadn't any warning that Blitz was awake. She smiled softly. "I should have guessed that I would have no idea when a Navy SEAL wakes up."

He opened those piercing green eyes, giving her a slow, lazy smile as he reached up and tugged her down into his arms. He gathered her firmly against him, his cheek resting on the top of her head, the rough stubble of his beard catching in her hair. She slipped her knee between his and snuggled down, savoring the quiet pleasure of being close to him.

She felt the pressure of his lips against her hair as he murmured softly, "We're always ready for direct action, babe." He sighed. "I do know that you're much nicer to wake up to than a bunch of smelly guys."

For some reason, his words stirred a profoundly poignant feeling in her, and she gazed up at him, her world tilting way too much off its axis. This felt like the beginning of something powerful, something special, but she couldn't allow herself to give in to it, as tempting as it was. This was temporary and they both had already agreed.

His expression softened, and his warm gaze seduced her as he said huskily, "What were you thinking about?"

She gently caressed his mouth with her fingertips, her voice even more husky than his. "My dad, actually. Maybe it's all the terrorist stuff or the fact that you are in the military. I don't know."

"What about him?"

"I think about them...my parents, so young and in love, and how hard it was for her. There are only blurred memories of him," she whispered unevenly.

He stared at her for a moment, then hauling in a breath he closed his eyes and tightened his arms around her. His voice was gruff when he said, "Tell me about him."

His hold on her remained fierce and unrelenting, and Bree closed her eyes, trying not to get too emotional about it. “He’d already enlisted in the Marines when he’d turned eighteen. He swept my mom up into his life, took her to base with him, helped her finish high school and raise me.”

“You lost him in Mogadishu, right?”

“Yes. The mission was supposed to take an hour. Instead, a large portion of the assault force, including my dad, was stranded through a long night in a hostile city, surrounded and fighting for their lives. Two Black Hawks downed, the pilots dead or dying, the warlord who had perpetuated the battle in the first place, Mohamed Farrah Aidid, lost a lot of people that day but gloated at the victory. They even celebrate the date as a national holiday.” Her gut clenched at the thought of that. “They killed my father and celebrate his death.”

His expression darkened with a troubled frown. “That’s truly fucked up.”

She nodded. “Terrorists, in any form, need to be put on alert and kept on alert. The world isn’t going to tolerate it. We can’t rest until we get justice, justice my father never really got.”

His gaze was unwavering, and his voice was steady as he asked, “That’s all intertwined, isn’t it? Your dad, the way he died, your mom, and 9/11.”

“Yes. I wish I could have known him. And yes, his death feels hollow.”

“A warrior’s death is never hollow, Bree. He fought and died for his country. It doesn’t matter about the circumstances. Although it sucks that the perpetrator of the inhuman acts of Mogadishu was never brought to justice, your dad did his job. That is irrefutable evidence of who your dad was,” he said gently. “How about your mom?”

She hesitated as she considered his question, her eyes connecting frankly with his. “She’s a survivor. Driven and unrelentless, she developed a career as a fashion buyer for major department stores as she worked her way up to a corporate job at Michael Kors as I told you, she’s still there.”

“That is impressive.”

“I rarely saw her as a child, or teenager and even now as an adult. We have a good relationship, as I learned early to separate myself from her and be self-sufficient.”

“That explains a lot.”

She gave him a wry smile. “I told you about the reasons I went into the FBI, but not all of it. One was 9/11.”

“And the other one?”

“I was interested in the military and aspects of it that related to 9/11. Like those kids. I knew what it was like to lose a parent. For seven years after 9/11, I was obsessed with it and my mom thought it was too much for a child as young as myself. She started to restrict my access and often told me that sweet young girls don’t want that kind of gritty life. But the more I felt deprived of the knowledge, the more I hungered to find out more about my dad, 9/11, the military, and the FBI. I guess I wanted to know it all, to understand what motivated my dad to serve, the mistakes and shortcomings of the agency that was supposed to keep us safe, and the terrorists who hated us so much they slammed planes into the Trade Center.”

Blitz slipped his hand into her hair, again cradling her head against his shoulder. He nestled his cheek against her hair. “Sometimes it takes a lot of information to make us understand, give us answers to our questions, and help us to find some peace. But often all that information just leads to more questions.”

“It was also a little terrifying, because my mom was there that day in New York.”

Bree turned her head, pressing her face into the curve of his neck, and Blitz’s hold tightened as he murmured, “I can imagine.”

“She was shaken when she got home, and I was so thankful to have her back. It was heartbreaking to see all the kids who had lost their parents. I guess, because I only had my mom, it caused a lot of anxiety.”

“I know you well enough now to realize you weren’t going to back down from your exploration or investigation.”

He’d pegged her there, and Bree gave him a wry look. “I approached my paternal grandparents when I was fourteen. Just called them up and asked to meet them.”

Blitz laughed softly at her shrewd expression. “No holds barred.”

She nudged him. “Nope. My mom hadn’t been very vigilant in making sure I had a relationship with them. We moved around a lot for her job, and she took every opportunity to relocate when there was a juicy position that would advance her career. They lived in Florida where my dad and mom were from, and I insisted that I wanted to spend the summer with them. My mom didn’t understand it, but then she was always scattered and not very emotionally attached to many people. She constantly needed the stimulation of work to keep her occupied. Anyway, I went to my grandparents, and they were wonderful. They showed me so many pictures of him, including the

military ones. He was such a cute kid and grew into a very handsome man. My grandmother had his medals and his uniforms. She'd kept everything for me when I grew up. I was so thankful. She also gave me access to my dad's stuff, and I found Sherlock Holmes. He was an avid fan and had all the books. I got hooked on the investigations, the clues, and the solving of the cases using his intellect. It filled something in me to have a connection with my father. It was what I needed, and it formed the basis of my future."

"Your grandmother was a smart woman. Bless her." His eyes mesmerized her, and his touch was infinitely gentle as he dragged his hand through her hair and caught her by the back of the head, leaning down. His lips were warm as he brushed a corner of her mouth with a whisper of a kiss, then roughly pressed her against him, his breathing uneven.

"As much as I would love to lay here with you, we need to get moving. PT?"

"Yes, please. Running?"

He made a face. "Cardio isn't my favorite, but let's see if I can keep up with you."

She laughed and unabashedly watched him get out of bed. Had to be one of her best assignments ever. What a view, especially his honed-to-perfection butt.

THE MORNING after the G5 Conference party, the tactical staging area was full of Buck's team preparing for the op. Blitz had shown up this morning with the same clothes that he'd worn to the embassy. He noted Blitz had left with Agent West.

Hmmm. Blitz had wised up and made a move on the lovely Agent West. He wasn't as dumb as a mule. But Buck couldn't help regretting that the lovely Bree was now off limits.

Buck slipped his tactical knife into its sheath on his vest. They had just gotten word that Boko Haram had kidnapped two US aid workers from a village in the Diffa Region where three hundred thousand Nigerians had been displaced by the armed conflict between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram. They were currently making a run for the Nigerian border. It was their intent to make a statement as the two women were nuns, and Boko Haram was waging a war against Christians and the West. Because the Niger military had been on top of the incident, it was still possible to stop the convoy from slipping over the border where there was no doubt the women would be tortured and killed, most likely on a world stage.

Twenty-six-year-old Caitlin Massy and forty-five-year-old Serena Lachey's lives were now in their hands. Hands that didn't falter, hands that had the skill and the capability to rescue them from their terrible fate—Buck and his teammates with an assist from the Nigerien military.

They could run.

They weren't going to make it.

All tacked up, he grabbed his M4 and headed for the door. Speak of the

devil: Bree was there waiting outside to see Blitz off. Since this op wasn't related to the Ogdens' investigation or the apprehension of Olenska and Achebe, she wasn't part of the team.

He nodded to her, and she nodded back. He could tell by her expression that she wanted to go, but that wasn't a surprise to him. She was a go-getter, more a direct-action participant if ever he saw one. Definite SEAL babe material. Warriors always wanted to be in the fight.

The *whop-whop* of the chopper, still a few minutes out, sounded in the distance.

"Joker, pull Blitz and Gator from the op and send them and Agent West to the briefing room. They're needed," Hollywood said. "I have two shooters from Bravo filling in for you. Baltimore and Shotgun are enroute and will rendezvous with you at the border."

"Copy that," Joker replied. "You heard him." He nodded to Gator and Blitz. Blitz leaned over and told Agent West, and the three of them headed out.

The chopper landed and they headed for it. The op was relatively simple. There were two Boko Haram trucks headed for the border and they were going to pull a Captain Phillips. Take out the four Boko Haram members in the trucks simultaneously.

They boarded and settled inside. The plan was to overtake and pass the convoy, embed in the hillside, and complete the op. Buck was aware that terrorist activity was getting more intense in the region, and in fact, he wouldn't be surprised if the political situation in Niger changed dramatically. In Buck's opinion, the current president was under fire for pursuing many unpopular reforms and came from a minority group in Niger. Add to all that the fact that Niger had a history of political upheaval, and it seemed inevitable all the pressures of the region would impact the country. Isabelle had her work cut out for her.

One thing Buck was sure of—they weren't leaving here without justice for their ambassador and his family.

The engines roared, the sound deafening as they sped adjacent to the route the Boko Haram convoy was progressing. In moments, they would be at the ambush point just miles from the border.

The lift of the helicopter was familiar to Buck, signaling that the bird was going to land. His muscles tightened as Joker's voice came through the comms. "Get ready to infil."

As soon as the chopper set down, Buck was off and moving toward the high hill overlooking the road. He was soon joined by Joker, the team, and the two Bravo operators.

“Good to have you aboard,” Joker said. “Professor and Shotgun, you’ll take up your positions on the opposite hill, Baltimore and Zorro on this side.” They had a nice vantage point to snipe the four terrorists riding in the cabs, one on either side of the female hostages.

Both trucks were filled with fighters, and it would be up to the Niger army to handle them.

“Timing will be everything,” Buck said, lying on his stomach, as they watched the two-and-a-half-ton trucks grind their way on the open, dusty road in the distance.

Joker lowered his binoculars and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Behind them, the sun was high in the sky, beating down and accounting for that one-hundred-and-twenty-degree heat.

As the convoy came closer, it was clear they were pushing the engines as a loud, steady rumbling filled the air. They knew they weren’t safe until they crossed the border.

“Buck, D-Day, Bear, and I will neutralize any threat to our hostages once the tangos in the cabs are down. Professor and Zorro will join us after they take their shots.”

Joker set the binoculars to his eyes. “Two guys in the lead cab.”

“Copy that,” Professor confirmed through the comms. “Two in the cab of the second vehicle.”

“Acquire targets,” Joker said.

Zorro said, “Target 1, green.”

“Target 2, green,” Baltimore said.

“Target 3, green,” Professor stated.

“Target 4, green,” Shotgun confirmed.

“Weapons release on my command,” Joker said, looking through the binoculars. As the trucks got closer to the optimal place for the military to move in, Joker said, “Hold! Hold! Hostage in play.”

Buck looked through his binoculars and saw the lead vehicle, with the forty-five-year-old Serena Lachey fighting with the passenger tango. It was clear he was assaulting her. The driver was yelling. Serena, with her hands bound, was pummeling her attacker. The driver grabbed the back of her head and slammed it against the dash, and she flopped back in the seat, her head

lolling to the side. She was unconscious. Then the driver pulled a gun on the passenger, screaming some more. The passenger held up his hands.

Before either one of them could move another muscle, Joker said, "Execute."

Buck watched as all four died simultaneously with silent, suppressed head shots. The trucks continued moving but started to slow. Buck stored his binoculars and rose, sprinting for the embankment with Joker and Zorro on his heels.

On the other side of the road, Professor, Bear, and D-Day were running full out for the second truck.

When Buck reached the cab, the truck was still rolling. He pulled open the door and dragged the dead driver out. He fell onto the dusty road. He reached in and grabbed hold of Serena's arm and hauled her unconscious body across the blood-soaked seat. He turned, transferring her to the arms of Zorro, who transitioned her to his shoulder and took off for the hillside. Professor sprinted past with his arm around Caitlin. Her face was white, her eyes wide and terrified, but she maintained her speed.

With the hostages out of the danger zone, Buck started to retreat, but a fighter popped into the cab from the cloth-covered throughway. He pulled up his automatic and Buck didn't have time to bring his M4 into position.

A shot shattered the windshield into a thousand pieces and took out the fighter.

"You're welcome," Baltimore's voice came through the comm. Buck smiled and he gave the sniper a two-finger salute. The back of the truck broke into yelling chaos as the military converged. One guy leapt through, kicking Buck out of the cab.

Buck landed on his hip and shoulder, pain shooting through both joints.

As the tango exited the cab on the driver's side, he dropped and dove underneath the truck. From his prone vantage point, Buck saw him scramble across the road on the other side and take off running.

Buck jumped up, rolled under the truck, and covered the distance between them, ignoring the pain shooting into his hip.

A shot caught the guy in the shoulder, and he fell, tumbling and rolling.

"No shot," Baltimore said, as the guy disappeared around the bend of the hill.

The terrorist had barely made it to his feet when Buck caught him and brought him down hard, before they came to a halt.

With lightning-quick skill, Buck cut the man twice, trapping his wrist and slicing through tendons, then reaching down and severing the femoral artery at the groin. Each cut was executed in seconds. The guy's gun fell from his disabled grip, and Buck kicked it away.

He tightened his grip on the knife as the man bled out in seconds.

He turned back to the fray where most of the fighters had either been killed or neutralized.

There was no mercy for the kind of men who kidnapped women—nuns for fuck's sake—to subject them to unspeakable acts. Those sisters' prayers had been answered and he was their avenging angel.

A-fucking-men.

* * *

BLITZ GAVE Gator a confused look as they entered the briefing room, Bree on their heels. It didn't bode well that he avoided Blitz's gaze. Inside was Hollywood, their CO, Isabelle, Harley, Kat...and Volkov.

What the ever-loving fuck was he doing here?

They took seats at the conference table. Something big was up. The tension in the room was strong. Isabelle cleared her throat. "We have a situation that has to be resolved now." She glanced at Volkov, who looked like he was going to come out of his skin. "For those of you who don't know him, this is Russia's DC Ambassador Aleksei Volkov." She set her hands on the conference table and leaned forward. "What I'm about to tell you is highly classified and cannot be repeated to anyone outside of this room."

Gator sighed, still avoiding Blitz's gaze.

Gator knew what was going on, and he didn't like it.

"Ambassador Volkov is defecting to the United States." She let that sink in for a moment. "But that's not all. He has physical evidence that Leonid Olenska, his daughter, Anya, and his son, Uri conspired with Aleksei's father Pavel Volkov, the Foreign Minister in the Kremlin to assassinate Ambassador Ogden and his family."

Blitz wondered what the hell he, Gator, and Bree were doing here. So let the guy defect. What did this have to do with two SEALs and an FBI agent?

"He is willing to trade that information to us, but he wants his mom and sister liberated from Russia."

“What?” Blitz said, a gnawing, uneasy feeling twisting through his gut. “Is that why we’re here?”

Hollywood gave him a hard stare. “Yes, that’s why you’re here.”

“What is Agent West’s role in this?”

“Harley Quill, who is a CIA Shadowguard, will remain with the ambassador to protect him, therefore, we need someone who speaks fluent Russian,” Hollywood said.

Anger rising in him, Blitz clenched his teeth. “You can’t be serious. She’s not trained for this.”

“Wait one second,” Bree said, glaring at him. “I’d like to speak for myself.” It was clear she was annoyed at his response. “Where exactly in Russia are the Volkovs?”

“Moscow. You will be flown to Finland, pick up a plane, and parachute into the outskirts of Moscow. You will then make your way to the Volkov estate and extract the two women. The CIA will provide transportation and egress from the city.”

“Parachute?” she said, her voice a bit uneven. “I’ve never parachuted.”

“We’re aware. Blitz will buddy jump with you,” Hollywood said it like an order.

“Why the hell can’t you get someone from the CIA to handle this in country?” Blitz said, anger rising in him. He restrained the urge to slam his hand against the table.

“They’re too closely watched,” Kat said.

“Is there a problem, Petty Officer Berenger?” Hollywood pinned him with an unforgiving look, but Blitz couldn’t seem to back down.

Drawing a deep breath to keep the anger out of his voice, he said, his tone flat, “This is dangerous and risky for Agent West.” He made the muscles of his face relax, then inhaled again. “She’s not trained for this kind of an op.”

“So, you’ve said,” Isabelle replied then turned to Bree. “We don’t have an alternative Russian speaker we can get here or to Moscow quickly enough. We want the intel that Ambassador Volkov has. It’s imperative to bring the people responsible for the brutal murders of the Ogdens to justice. Are you willing to take on this mission?”

Bree didn’t hesitate. “Yes, ma’am. I’m confident I can be an asset to the team. I know Moscow well.”

The memory of soft skin and warm body, the many hours they had partnered together, the hours they had spent talking, her courage, and her skill

set weren't in question. He hadn't been the same man since he'd met her. The thought of her in that much danger sent his protective instincts off the chart. "No!" Blitz said and realized it had come out of his mouth. He was standing, his chair had been ejected and hit the wall from the force of his abrupt rising.

Hollywood raised his brows and said, "Can I have the room for a moment?"

The memory of the IED and his damn near dying of fear for her life had only exacerbated his incredibly inconvenient obsession. He was so out of line right now. If Hollywood suspected that he was sleeping with her and this was personal, there was no way he was going on this op, and that wasn't acceptable. He'd rather be there to make sure she got home in one piece rather than stewing here in Niger while she risked her life. He worked at corralling his anger.

When the door closed on the last person, Hollywood walked up to him. "Is there something I need to know? Something other than the fact that Agent West isn't trained for this op?"

"No, sir," Blitz said, not keen on lying to his CO, but it was a damn sight better than being replaced.

"Do you want me to choose another member of your team?" Hollywood didn't blink, just held his gaze, steady and sure.

Blitz's jaw clenched in anger, but he maintained his cool composure when he answered, keeping it brief. "No, sir."

"Then your protest is duly noted. Can we move on now with the planning? This is very time-sensitive, and I don't have the luxury of babysitting you. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, sir," he said, very quietly, very calmly. "I apologize for my outburst, sir."

He went to the door, and everyone filed in. Bree gave him a glare filled with both disappointment and anger. Hurting her made him swear to himself. He hadn't wanted her to feel as if he didn't trust her or that she was inadequate at what she did, but this clandestine op was something she had never experienced, seasoned agent or not. Trying to ignore all the feelings turning over in his chest, he focused on Kat as she started to talk.

They laid out the plans and all the mission information. Volkov was very detailed and very helpful. It was clear to Blitz that he was worried about his family, which was definitely understandable. He felt the same about Bree, so he grudgingly had to sympathize with the Russian.

The brief ended with them ordered to get tacked up and pack what they needed. Their flight would be leaving in half an hour from Niamey to the Utti Air Base in Kouvola, Finland, where they would pick up a Globemaster III that would fly them to within forty miles of Moscow where they would glide to their infiltration point.

As soon as they were clear of the briefing room and the building, Bree grabbed Blitz's vest and dragged him into a shaded area close to the building.

"How dare you speak for me! That was outrageous. I might not be a SEAL, but I'm an independent, tested agent. You had no right!"

"I know. I wasn't speaking for you. I was voicing my own opinion. I don't think this is a good idea."

"Why? I thought we got past this. I thought you trusted me?"

"I do trust you, but this isn't going to be a walk in the park for you. Gator and I are used to this kind of op." Recognizing the sharp edge in his voice, Blitz paused, making his muscles relax. He hunched forward, forcing a calm, reasonable tone. "I find it difficult to turn off my protective instincts here. Is that so hard for you to understand?"

She tipped her head back and closed her eyes, and he could see her trying to regroup. Releasing a tired sigh, she finally looked at him. "This is about your fears, not me. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, goddammit," he said fiercely, holding her gaze, torn between the multitude of emotions swirling inside him. But it was the other more complex feelings that threw him off-kilter and had his heart beating hard and fast in his chest. He broke eye contact and paced away, running his hands through his hair. Her words did painful damage to his heart. Clenching and unclenching his jaw, he reached down deep for an ease he didn't feel, but it eluded him. "This is about me being afraid for you," he said, his chest expanding with the truth of the words, his voice gruff. Affection and caring. Tenderness and longing. All the types of emotions that scared the shit out of him.

Her head came up, and she stared at him, a stunned expression on her face. "I know it's unprofessional, and it smacks of sexism, but I don't give a damn. I don't want anything to happen to you." His throat closed up, and he shut his eyes, a surge of hard emotion cutting through him.

She was quiet for so long, he didn't think she was going to answer. He didn't know what he was going to do if she turned on her heel and left. He'd insulted her more than once, not intending to, but at the moment he was more

concerned about how she would weather this op. He was more concerned with her being okay than with whether he got what he wanted out of this. They had to work together. It wasn't going to be a choice.

Which made him wonder...what did he want out of this? He was still pondering the rather surprising answer to that when she interrupted his thoughts.

She gave him an impatient sigh. "Okay, I get it. I care about you too." Releasing a pent-up breath in a rush, Bree slid her arms around his neck. Closing his eyes against the onslaught of sensation, Blitz turned his face against her and wrapped her in a hard embrace. Finally, she let him go.

"I will need your help on this. It is out of my comfort zone. I haven't ever parachuted into enemy territory, or had to pretend I was Russian, or extract two people who will surely die if we don't succeed." That last part ended on a gulp. "I don't want to fail. I don't want to fail you or the team or the US. I'm confident I will give it all I have, face it all with courage and determination. So, will you help me through this? I promise you. I won't let you or Gator down."

He slipped his fingers under her chin. "Of course, I will. We'll be thorough and I'll explain everything. We have a seven-hour flight. We can get it all together then."

She looked into his eyes for the longest time, tenderness softening her features, and seemed to see past all those internal barriers he'd erected long ago...after Amy, after the pain of his dad's disappointment. Then she gathered herself and said, "Thank you."

"You know I would never hurt you intentionally, Bree, or undermine you. It was purely a knee-jerk reaction."

"Jerk being the key word."

"Yeah, even if I have stupid, neanderthal, caveman ways."

She gave him a wry smile. "That's double knuckle-dragging."

He smiled back. "If the animal skins fit..."

She took a soft breath. "I realized that after you quite thoroughly fractured my anger and outrage with your honesty. I can't fault it, but over the time we've spent together, I've seen the man you are, with the deep bonds you have, and what they will do for you, and you for them. And what you were willing to do for me because that is who you are."

He took her mouth. Right then. No preamble, no slow lowering of his lips to hers, no choice given. Just a choice made.

The surprise of it kept her still, but only for a second. He mentally braced himself for her to shove at him. He'd have respected that, backed away, though, it would have cost him. He knew then how well and truly entangled he'd become. It had never been like this for him. Almost irrational. He relied on instinct, on rational thought. Not on emotion and his hard-on.

Then she moaned, just a little guttural sound in the back of her throat. And her hands came up and fisted in his hair as she pulled his mouth down on hers. And kissed him back with every ounce of intensity she had in her.

And he knew there was no protecting himself from this. Or from her.

ISABELLE'S DRIVER dropped them at Niamey's Airport where a C-17 Globemaster was finishing up its preflight checks. Blitz's mood hadn't changed much. He was still vehemently opposed to Bree going on this mission, and although he had mollified her regarding his opposition, she was aware he didn't think she was prepared for what lay ahead.

She was determined to keep her game face in place if it killed her.

She hadn't known what had made him act so obnoxious and unprofessional until he'd told her what was going through his mind, then his admission had made her anger dry up. What she did know was that leaning on him, even a little bit, would be dangerous. She'd spent most of her adult life learning how to lean only on herself. Just because things were looking promising, in and out of bed, didn't mean it was easy for her to shore up her own defenses.

Part of her was freaked out and part of her was up for the challenge, not only because Blitz wasn't happy about it, but because she knew her own skills, her limits, and he didn't. God bless him, he was so angry, and that made her glow inside and made her wary. He'd have to care about her a lot to be so mad about it.

Okay, so she'd never parachuted and okay, that scared the bejeezus out of her. Thirty thousand feet. The number was overwhelming. That was almost six miles above the earth. Her palms got a little sweaty thinking about it. But then she looked at Blitz and most of the fear subsided. She'd be strapped to him, this capable, calm—when it didn't have to do with her safety—and cool man.

His training was legendary, including the many, many times he'd parachuted from a perfectly good plane. She'd seen his body, knew he was physically intimidating with layer upon layer of hard muscle, enough to rope his shoulders with a dozen of those layers, enough to six-pack his abs and burn the memory of him into every single cell she had. Yeah, that was one delicious memory.

And, oh God, he was so damn brave. She'd also seen that firsthand.

They exited the vehicle as crewmen rushed to remove chocks and blocks, preparing to roll out. They were traveling light. Blitz and Gator were still in their combat gear, and she had nothing but the clothes on her back, which weren't exactly suited for the drastically different temperatures in Finland and Moscow, but she had been told the CIA had their gear and transportation locked down.

All she had to do was focus on getting prepared to jump out of a plane. Bree took a breath and tried to steady her nerves. She had agreed to this, and she was needed, an integral part of the mission. She'd made her decision back in the briefing room where she could have refused Isabelle. She was at the plane and there was no turning back now. Not that she wanted to. A few nerves about doing something she'd never done before was understandable, and she could cut herself some slack.

The mission wasn't what was troubling her the most. It was Blitz's reaction, which then fueled her own emotional reaction, and it was the emotional part she had trouble dealing with, because she'd never, ever expected to feel so connected to Blitz in anything more than a physical way. Sex with him had been wonderful, hotter, and better than she'd ever imagined, but it was what happened in the aftermath that shook her to her core—his outburst at the briefing. At first, she'd been so angry, until he'd confessed to her how he was feeling. That admission rocked her world.

Blitz had to go and muddle up a perfectly good situation, making her realize how isolated she was from the people in her life. By choice. She'd always been independent, had gotten used to the fact that her mom didn't consider her or her feelings when making her decisions. In hindsight, it was because she had been on autopilot, working out her grief with Bree's dad and providing for Bree. That's what she had been doing all these years, expecting Bree's self-sufficiency to sustain her. But now she almost felt boxed in by her feelings for Blitz, and she wasn't quite sure how to deal with him, a man who was also torn about his own needs and wants. So with that glimmer of

tenderness she'd seen in his gaze, it was no wonder that her heart was feeling a bit torn and confused.

Regardless of her emotional tangle, Blitz's presence was like a warm blanket behind her, his hand slipping to the small of her back. "I'm afraid the accommodations are lacking," he said. She looked at him over her shoulder. His tone was neutral, but the tension radiating from his body and the steel glint in his eyes told her he was now in full warrior mode.

"I've traveled on a military cargo plane before. It's not all cushy rides with the FBI."

Gator smiled. "No? I'm so shocked."

The plane wasn't completely empty. A pallet, which was secured aft, was a few feet forward of the ramp. Supplies for Finland or a farther destination?

The seats faced the center of the plane on both sides and were made out of the familiar orange netting supported by metal tubing. Very uncomfortable if her memory served.

She accepted earplugs from the flight tech, stuck them in her ears, and sat down in one of the seats as the hydraulic lift started to close. The engines fired up, the noise deafening.

She braced herself for liftoff, the smell of jet fuel, the bumpy ride, and the vibrations that traveled through the metal and seemed to tune with every bone in her body, tweaking her memory. Oh, yeah.

Once they were in the air and hit their cruising altitude, the rumbling from the engines subsided. Cool, fresh air cleared out the smell of jet fuel. "The takeoff in one of these is as rough as I remember."

"It doesn't even register with us anymore," Blitz said. "Mostly, we sleep, but we're not going to get the luxury this time around. We'll need a good portion of the flight time to practice and get you ready for the jump."

"You want to start now?"

"Yeah, no time like the present."

"Okay."

"I do admire what you're doing, Bree. It's way out of your skillset. Parachuting from such a height is daunting."

"Trust me, I'm fully aware of the monumental task in front of me. I just want to get on with it." She sighed and tried not to think about that. She would envision success. Besides, Gator and Blitz were the best at what they did, and they were the ones who had all the training in the world. No matter how much it went against the grain, she would put herself fully in their

hands.

He smiled at her dry tone. “Do you know the difference between a static line and free fall?”

“No.”

“Static line releases your chute for you. In free fall, you pull the ripcord,” Gator answered.

Blitz shifted in his seat making her so aware of his tall, broad-shouldered frame. A tall, broad-shouldered frame she was having an increasingly difficult time ignoring. It didn't help that she could feel his gaze pinned on her. “But you won't be pulling the ripcord,” Blitz said. “We'll be jumping in tandem. You'll wear a harness and get clipped to me. I'll take care of the logistics once we jump.”

“All you have to do is hang on for the ride,” Gator said with a grin.

She nodded, suddenly feeling very inept and not liking it one bit.

“We're going to be doing a HAHO jump. That's a High Altitude, High Opening maneuver, meaning we're going to deploy our chute at approximately twenty-five thousand feet and glide about forty miles to the LZ or landing zone. This allows us to hide our presence, since the plane won't have to fly that close to the target and is an excellent choice for cross-border operations. The other consideration is we're going to be jumping in darkness. We'll barely be able to see the ground. I will rely on my instruments to navigate,” Gator said.

“Being out of your element isn't a crime,” Blitz said softly.

“You trust me to follow your lead. I'll follow.”

“My instincts tell me you'll do great. And they're rarely wrong. I wouldn't be sitting here on this bird if I didn't listen to them.”

He was so intent, so serious, so certain. It was unnerving, both his mere presence and his focus on what, by rights, was a catastrophe waiting to happen. She'd be lying if she said there wasn't a large part of her that was grateful for the man he was. If she didn't believe in him so thoroughly, this would be more than a terrifying maneuver. She thought back to that iconic frat party and the way he had shut down any opposition, even among a bunch of drunk, immature college boys. It was clear to every woman in there that Blitz was a man in the making, a real, true-to-life maturity that went beyond his years. She had secretly admired, even coveted, his rebellious nature, but she hadn't been able to see that her boyfriend had never been on board with her dreams. Maybe that was when she got it into her head that she had to fake

it to make it or maybe it was even further back, connected to her mom, who questioned everything about her interests as if they were someone else's and not hers. Blitz already had the SEAL mindset before he even started on that path. The men who dedicated themselves to overcoming obstacles for people who otherwise couldn't do it for themselves.

She cleared her throat. "Forty miles. How long will that take?"

"Well, it depends on the amount of air resistance, but about twenty-five minutes," Gator said.

"Yeah, it's approximately a minute per thousand feet," Blitz nodded, then shrugged. "Give or take," Blitz said. "Faster if we were carrying our usual sixty-pound rucks."

She shook her head. "You guys are crazy to say the least, but you win me over every time. No matter how complicated all this is, it's just another day at the office for you."

Blitz chuckled. "Hey, I like that." He grinned suddenly, and her entire body went on red-hot alert.

"You would," Bree said, fascinated with that satisfied smirk. "All in a day's work, saving people and punting bad-guy asses, doorkicking and pipe hitting—"

"Parachuting with a complete, albeit adorable novice," Blitz said, exchanging a wry expression with Gator.

"Yeah, she's some Fucking New Guy for sure."

"Shut up," Bree blurted out.

"You better heed that warning, Blitz. SEAL babes always mean business," Gator said with a chortle.

"SEAL babe?" Bree asked, exasperated with both of them.

"Yeah, the kind of woman who could keep up and surpass one of us. Isabelle has saved my life more than once. I had to keep up with her. You are with Blitz, aren't you?" Gator asked.

She looked at Gator and everything in her wanted to shout it to the rafters...er fiberglass ceiling. "Yes, I am. With him, on him, over him." She stared at Gator in defiance of any kind of norms, then she leaned over and kissed Blitz. She could feel his surprise and heard Gator's chuckle. These were men who did what needed to be done? Well, she would show them what she needed done right now. Her mouth on Blitz's.

He grasped her arms and broke the kiss. There was no smile, just the softening of his handsome features, the way he looked when he made love to

her, and he lowered his head. His mouth was a breath from hers when he said, "I'm with you, too." he murmured. Bree felt something give inside, releasing the tension locking her spine a little bit. If she'd known kissing him would alleviate some of her anxiety, she'd have done it from takeoff.

Then he kissed her. It was instantly different, slower, patient in commitment, and Bree felt the floor tilt and slipped her arms around his waist, then settled into the warmth of his embrace. His hands rode down her arms before they wrapped her tightly, his mouth a slow, smooth ride over hers. Desire pulled at her.

Gator moved away and it was a few minutes before her training could resume.

Hours later the cargo plane touched down, the bay doors in the belly opened. She had already been chilled as the temperature dropped the farther they flew north. She was now downright freezing, shivering. When they reached the tarmac, they were ushered to a hangar and things moved fast. She was given a bag and directed to a screen. She walked the short distance and ducked behind it.

Unzipping the bag she found thermal undergarments, a black, skin-tight suit, warm socks, boots, and a microfiber down-like jacket, gloves, and a knit hat. She changed quickly, so thankful to be warm. The last article in the bag was a black jumpsuit with different pockets. It was made out of a stiff black material. She climbed in and zipped it over her clothes.

Back out in the hangar, she met up with Blitz and Gator. Blitz was already wearing the tandem parachute, a black backpack-looking device.

They had been clear about what was going to happen once the plane was close to the target and Bree kept going over the instructions in her head.

A man came up to them, and so far, there were no names exchanged. She figured that was customary. "We're set for you to get your preflight oxygen. The C-17 will be refueled, checked over, and ready for you to load up in an hour."

Blitz had told her that they would need to breathe pure oxygen to flush any nitrogen from their bloodstreams, preventing the same kind of hypoxia divers experienced. They were led to three chairs, the black helmets ready for them to don. Bree sat down as Blitz helped her with her helmet, slipping it over the tight, knit hat and down over her face. He set the oxygen mask over her face, then adjusted the neck closing to make sure no skin was exposed.

"Breathe slow and steady," he said. The man had already helped Gator,

and he moved to Blitz to get him situated.

“Radio check,” Gator said.

“Copy,” Blitz said, his deep voice soothing in her ear.

“Copy,” she said.

Then before she knew it, they had flown to thirty-thousand feet. The unpadding walls magnified the noise. The temperature dropped rapidly at this altitude, and she could see frost forming on the crew chief’s window near the hatch.

“Testing oxygen,” Gator said, and she and Blitz followed suit.

The crew chief held up his hands, signaling they were five minutes out. The cabin started to depressurize to make sure it was the same as the outside, so they wouldn’t be sucked out of the cargo door as it started to slowly descend, and she caught a glimpse of the dark night sky in the sliver between the fuselage and the bay door. A light flipped on, looking like a red traffic signal.

Her heart pounded and her mouth went dry as she rose at the touch of Blitz’s hand on her arm. She backed into him as he’d trained her, and Gator secured them together. Then he turned so Blitz could inspect him, giving the all-clear.

The crew chief held up one finger, signaling it was almost time. They shuffled toward the open cargo door and waited, her nerves tight. Icy wind screeched inside, beating across her suit, but she barely felt the cold.

“I’ve got you, Bree. Relax. This is something pretty spectacular that few people experience.”

The buzzer screamed inside the aircraft, the green light blinking brightly.

Then there was no more time. Blitz simply leaned forward, and they fell out of the plane. Wind streaked past as they dropped for a few seconds, then the chute deployed, yanking them back up and filling. She let out a long breath. Blitz’s hands were already on the lead lines and guiding them to someplace below...a long, long way below.

She’d expected to experience that icky stomach drop like on a rollercoaster, but as they floated, she took in the breathtaking view and simply forgot about everything. It was like someone had turned on her senses and it was an overload of so many things at once. She saw the world from an unfamiliar point of view, but the detail and beauty with only air between her and the earth was...simply spectacular. The whistling rush of the wind as they fell was gone, but now it was quiet. The kind of peace that comes after

chaos.

She could feel the temperature change and pressure on her skin. They floated and floated as Blitz periodically checked his altitude and, she suspected, his GPS, and it was so surreal to see the land come into sharper and sharper focus as trees grew bigger and the land grew closer.

As they rushed closer to the ground, she lifted her legs straight out in front of her. Blitz pulled on the toggles, and they slid onto the ground gently on their rear ends.

As she'd been instructed, she reached for the harness release and moved away from Blitz as he went to his knees and drew the chute in fast and tight. Bree looked up in enough time to see Gator's chute not far from them.

There was only pride there. Consummate masters of the universe, these two, with six others like them back in Niger. A whole force of them, small but mighty.

Wow.

She stepped out of the harness, then removed the oxygen and her helmet. She peeled off the jumpsuit, accepting weapons and a black vest from Blitz.

Bringing the parachutes with them, they started for a road not far from them, visible through the trees. As they approached, they saw a black Land Rover was parked on the shoulder behind a black van.

"Cuckoo's Nest," Blitz said into the radio and the headlights of the van flashed twice. They jogged out of the woods as two men left the cab of the van and grabbed their parachutes and other gear.

Handing the keys to Blitz, the man said, "We'll be waiting for you at Ostozhenka Street across from Gorky Park near the entrance to the Park Kultury subway station in one hour. Don't be late," he said. Then he and the other man jumped back into the van and drove off.

Don't be late... translated to if you are, there wasn't going to be any van waiting for them.

Blitz tossed the keys to Gator, and they got into the Land Rover. Blitz opened up the detailed map he'd gotten from Volkov along with a floorplan of the house and the security codes to the gate and doors. There was also a detailed description of the security patrol so they could avoid it both in and out.

Gator drove the speed limit as they passed a scattering of cars. The estate came up on the left, spread out with a large mansion, stables, and corralled fields. It was beautiful. The front gate was wrought iron and filled with

curlicues.

Gator parked the Rover about a quarter of a mile away in a secluded part of the estate surrounded by trees.

They exited the vehicle and moved through the forest as quietly and quickly as possible. Bree was sandwiched between Gator in the lead and Blitz bringing up the rear. They were all armed with automatic weapons and sidearms, but if they had to use them, this mission would be over. This was covert, a study in stealth.

When they reached the side gate, Gator had one minute to input the code and get them through before the patrol came by. He punched in the numbers and Bree held her breath. It was a cool night, in the forties, but she was sweating a little, her heart beating fast, and all her senses were on alert.

The gate released silently, thank God, and they slipped through, closed it, and dashed into the nearby shrubs just as the guards rounded the large house. As soon as they passed, Gator was up and moving. They made it to the back of the house in seconds, and Gator once again input the code.

Volkov said that his mother detested security guards inside the house, so there were none, but there were cameras. As soon as they were inside, entering into what was a large, gourmet kitchen, Gator moved off. He was going to run a loop for the cameras. When he gave the signal, Blitz would go for Volkov's mom, and Bree was headed to his sister.

He had said before he left that he gave his mom and sister a safety code and if they heard the code word, they were to ask no questions and move as quickly as possible.

"Cameras on loop, move."

Gator was going to Pavel's room to disable Volkov's father.

At the sound of his voice, Bree didn't hesitate. She ran for the main living area and the stairs. She and Blitz were up them in seconds, Gator bringing up the rear. She peeled off to the right and Gator and Blitz moved left.

When she reached Mila's room, she carefully opened the door and ducked inside. It was a cavernous bedroom, the bed a huge canopy with old-world charm, like the rest of the house. She crept forward and when she reached Mila's sleeping form, she covered her mouth. The woman woke up with a start and started to struggle.

Bree whispered, "*Nadeyat'sya.*" Mila immediately stopped struggling. She nodded, then got out of bed and ran to her closet, grabbing clothes and changing quickly. Something metal gleamed at her neck and Bree pointed to

it and shook her head.

“Please, it belonged to my grandmother. I can’t leave it behind. It’s all I’m taking,” she said in a watery whisper.

Bree caved. It was just a sentimental piece of jewelry. She understood how much something like that meant. She nodded, then took Mila’s arm and they hot-footed it to the door. Back out in the hall, Gator was already at the head of the stairs as Polina and Blitz came out of the shadows. The two women hugged each other, and Gator jogged down the stairs.

“Hold here,” Blitz said to Volkov’s mom and sister. Mila was the spitting image of her still quite beautiful mom, but there was a fading bruise at her eye. Paval wasn’t just a murdering bastard, he was also a wife beater. That figured.

“All clear,” Gator said. “Let me know when you reach the outside door.”

She and Blitz ushered the two women down the stairs, rushing them through the house into the kitchen. “Hold.” Both women stopped. “In position,” Blitz said.

“Copy that. Cameras are resuming,” Gator said.

In seconds, he was back. They slipped out of the back door, moving across the lawn, and out the security fence gate. They were back at the Land Rover in minutes. The whole op took less than twenty minutes.

They drove for several miles and suddenly there were headlights behind them.

“We might have a problem,” Gator said.

“Just keep moving.”

Mila and Polina clutched each other in the back seat with Bree. She reached out and squeezed his sister’s arm. “It’s going to be all right.”

When they reached the outskirts of the city, Gator did some magical driving and lost the tail. They reached the van at the curb exactly where they said they would be. Bree released a soft breath.

As soon as they stopped, Bree, Blitz, and Gator hustled the two women to the van. Sirens sounded in the distance and one of the men in the van swore. How had they found them? Gator pushed them inside and Blitz climbed in, but Bree stood on the sidewalk. They couldn’t be caught. Everything rode on getting these two women out and she wasn’t going to stand by while the very evidence they needed was so close, yet so far. It was time for the Ogdens to get their justice.

“Bree, get in!” Blitz hissed, but the metal of Mila’s locket caught the

light, and Bree sucked in a breath, staring at her. *The locket!*

She met Blitz's urgent and fierce look. Everything about him flashed through her in seconds. It hit her like a ton of bricks. This man only ever saw her, and her attempts to shore up her own fears against someone meaning way too much to her that she always felt she had to keep her distance, crumbled. He'd been true and honest and supportive. It was going to be so hard to do this to him.

"Sorry about this," Bree said, not sure if she was talking to Blitz or Mila. There was simply no time to explain, and it was her sentimentality that had put this whole mission in jeopardy. *Nadeyat'sya*

It meant hope. That's all that Volkov had.

Now, it was all that Bree had. Her heart skipped a beat at the revelations that crushed her. She had been such a fool.

She reached out and snatched the locket from around Mila's neck, turned, and ran into a dark, dangerous, and very uncertain night.

BREE CROUCHED at the entrance to Gorky Park and looked back to the curb where the black van had been idling, her heart beat in her ears. It was now gone. An uneasy feeling slipped over her. She was on her own. At least Blitz, Gator, the Volkovs, and the CIA guys had eluded capture. She'd take the small win.

There weren't many people out and about. It would make her easy to spot...but also make it easy to spot whoever was tailing her.

Fresh fear riddled her skin with heat. She was sure half of the KGB was looking for her, but she wanted to completely distract them away from the real target.

She spied the opening to the subway, but she didn't have any cash on her. No way to get a subway ticket.

She might have to improvise.

Bree's gaze moved rapidly over the entrance, her senses jumping. Men were coming this way. They stood out—confident, as if they owned the world, sharply dressed in black clothing and trench coats. Fear gnawed at her spine, and she fought for composure. Their faces lacked any emotion beyond lethal determination.

She was being followed, which confirmed her suspicions that the locket she'd snatched had a tracker in it. She had to get rid of it, eventually, but right now she needed to buy them time to fully escape.

They would trace it directly to her. Bree moved faster, her palms sweaty inside her gloves, her muscles pulled tight. Swallowing, she quickened her pace, shifting between buildings, people, and the filth in the alleys.

When she spotted the nightclub going at full tilt, she slipped out of the park, crossed the street, and ducked inside. She never hesitated, slipping into this role as if she'd been born to it.

With the few rubles she'd managed to steal from the unsuspecting waitress, it was enough for a few rides on the subway. She went into the back where the doors for the restrooms were but bypassed the ladies' room and darted out the back door.

Before she could take another step, someone caught her by the vest.

Bree tried getting away, but he dragged her back against him, pinning her arms to her sides. She threw her head back into his, but he avoided her move, and she only clipped his cheek. She drew her knees up, jammed them back into his shins, and he made a soft sound of pain, but held on. His grip grew punishing.

This was it for her. Her sacrifice would give them a chance to get away and she would have done what she could in this fight for justice. She didn't want to die. Be another statistic in this endless war on terror. Or an unidentified body discovered rotting somewhere. She'd worked too hard to get this far.

She had her job and nothing else. Distant from her family, few friends she trusted, and her reputation with the bureau. Faced with torture at the hands of one of the most ruthless organizations on the planet, her life had very little real substance to it. She vowed she wouldn't give up anything to them. No details, no information, nothing. She'd rather die than reveal something that could help her enemies. Too bad that was her only option.

He let her go and grabbed her arm in a vise grip, his eyes darting everywhere. *No need to be paranoid, buddy, my friends are long gone. So, fuck you.*

In Russian, he said, "Don't fight me, Ms. Volkov. You're going back home." Then he spoke to the air. "I've got her. Bring the car."

Ms. Volkov? They thought she was Mila!

Suddenly, he stopped as if he needed to focus on listening. Her gaze skipped around for any threat, intending to compound on it if she got the chance. She looked up at the windows, but their panes just reflected the chill of the pitch-black sky with no stars.

He spoke to her again. "Where is your mother?"

She said nothing.

It wouldn't be long now before someone realized she wasn't Mila, then it

would be on. She had the locket tucked into the slim vest's pocket along with the small amount of money she'd been able to scrounge in the nightclub. That and a knife in her boot and the slim handgun tucked into her waistband.

But the complications of killing KGB...that was filled with folly. Foreign agents tried not to kill other foreign agents. It was an unwritten rule, yet she might not have a choice. Damn, how did she go from an FBI Fly Team to a foreign agent? Blitz had been right. She wasn't trained for this and was completely out of her element. But that didn't matter. She would have to find a way to get out of this without bloodshed, if she could.

They emerged out of the alley to a car that was parked at the curb. There was another man behind the wheel. The others must have gone to their respective vehicles now that she was captured.

The window went down, the whirring barely perceptible in the quiet. The driver turned to her, his eyes widened, and he opened his mouth. She didn't wait for him to out her. She hit the man restraining her with her fist right in the solar plexus and turned, sprinting for the subway entrance. If she could only get to the—

Her brain shorted out and she fell into a charged darkness.

* * *

BLITZ CROUCHED in the shrubs lining the park. He figured that Bree would seek cover and this was his first choice. But when she emerged out of that alley, a man restraining her, his blood had gone cold and even colder as she made a break for it and they'd tased her.

He watched helplessly as they loaded her into the back seat of the car and the guy she'd hit got into the passenger seat. One other vehicle followed as the taillights of the car she was riding in disappeared from his view.

He spied only one other tango. He was standing near another vehicle, scanning the area. Left behind to make sure there were no others who needed tasing. Blitz moved carefully, circumventing the park until he came in at an angle to the lone abductor. Using parked cars for cover, he made his way to the man.

The guy was speaking Russian into the phone and Blitz couldn't make out much of it, but then he froze. The guy said *Olenska* loud and clear. Waiting for the conversation to end, he speculated if this really was the KGB

or Z Militia. Who the fuck had Bree?

As soon as the guy hung up, Blitz moved, grabbing him around the neck and choking him out. He quickly got him into the car, using zip ties he found in the guy's pocket to restrain him.

He started the engine, the GPS coming to life and on the little screen, he saw a blip, a moving blip.

Bree.

He grinned. Gotta love technology.

He put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb.

* * *

LEONID OLENSKA HADN'T GOTTEN where he was by being lax or meek. He hadn't survived in this business by being careless. There was one way and one way only to deal with the obstacles in his way.

Violence.

The Americans viewed war as an unfortunate obstacle, and in their minds, not an extension of diplomacy but a symptom of its failure. Leonid thought of war as a natural extension of a nation's interaction with everything around it. He had picked and chosen what worked best for him in his endeavor.

The West was at his door, sticking their noses in his business, and that was why David Ogden had to die. There were always casualties, including women and children, and Niger had been integral in his plans that were now coming to fruition. He'd attained what he needed from AAL and no longer had an interest in how that organization functioned. It would be best if its leader, with all the knowledge he had in his head, ceased to exist. He would leave those loose ends to his daughter.

A daughter he could lose as he'd lost his beloved son.

He closed his eyes, the memory of Uri so bright in his mind broke the terrible numbness beneath the pressure, and grief, sharp and rending, overwhelmed him. Uri—his Uri, the son whom he'd been so proud of had paid the price of his father's ambitions. Leonid would have ripped out his own heart to prevent that from happening. But a woman, an FBI agent, who was seeking her own justice, had ended his life, and no matter what it took, he would find that woman and end her in a slow, agonizing way. She would beg for death before he took her life with his own hand.

Impatient for progress, he left his posh accommodations that would rival any yacht, the interior of the vessel completely opened up for indoor/outdoor living, with an abundance of alfresco dining and relaxation options, including a full bar, BBQ, large sunpad forward, two misting systems for hot days, and a unique corner waterfall, fifty-four jet jacuzzi with a swim-up bar. He had a stunning master suite, a private office, lounge area, and tricked-out bathroom. Down below in one of the many cargo bays were his toys—jet skis and sleek motorboats, and two helicopters using the double helipads.

Traveling the long corridor toward amidships, he stepped out on the deck of his cargo vessel, the one hundred and one million *MPV Imperiya*, a striking gun-metal gray hull and white superstructure, specially built and fitted with both the ability to roll on and off and crane cargo. The hard wind of the North Atlantic buffeted his face as he moved to the cargo bay.

People stepped clear. He liked that. He liked it a lot. Fear and respect sent the crew back against the walls. He was on the catwalk, looking down into the massive hull.

The area was buzzing with activity. At least thirty men and women snapped to the orders given. Two missiles, each fifty-three feet long, were being reassembled. The launchers were retrofitted to work with French MRBM launchers he'd bought from AAL through Libya. Now all he waited for were the guidance chips.

“Call for you, boss,” a man yelled from below. Leonid reached for the handset on the steel wall.

“What is it?”

“Boss, we have an unidentified woman who had Mila Volkov's locket. She and Mrs. Volkov have disappeared. Foreign Minister Volkov was bound and gagged at his residence. What would you like us to do?”

Aleksei...that traitorous, upstart bastard.

This was a definite fly in the ointment. His plans needed to remain secret, but Pavel's self-righteous kid never could keep his fucking nose out of Leonid's business. He was much more brilliant than his father, and the boy had a core of steel when it came to his principles. He'd had Pavel send him to Niger where loose ends were tied up and he'd be easy to find. There was no doubt in his mind that Aleksei was defecting. Who knew what else he had on Leonid and his organization he could use to tip off the West. He couldn't afford that.

“Kill Pavel. Make it look like it was an accident. Tell anyone who gets in

the way that Mrs. Volkov and their daughter are indisposed. Find them and bring them to me and get someone who won't fail us to Niger and discreetly obtain Aleksei. Kill *anyone* who gets in your way, but I want Aleksei alive and here on this ship. Is that clear?"

"Yes, boss."

"His family will be the leverage I need. He's the epicenter of this fuck up, and I need to know how much we are compromised.

"And the woman?"

"Get as much information out of her as you can by any means. Then dispose of her."

"Got it, boss."

He hung up the phone, agitated. Everything hinged on a surprise attack. They would never see it coming, unless Aleksei was a ticking time bomb who would fuck up everything. He was going to enjoy killing Pavel's son, no matter how much he admired the kid's courage, determination, and principles.

The other thing about war...there were always traitors.

* * *

WET STONE BENEATH HER, Bree flinched. Little detonations went off throughout her body. She remained prone, letting the static play out. She wanted the empty darkness where she could hide in ignorance, where she was safe. She forced her eyes open and took in the square room. Nothing in it but a table and two chairs, some kind of pulley system overhead, and a round barrel in the corner. There was a drain in the middle of the floor with dark stains that iced her blood.

At least she was fully clothed, including her boots, the stretchy black suit, her microfiber vest, and her knit cap, but they had taken her gloves. Her hands were like ice.

Carefully, she inched back on her hands and knees, then sat upright, her back against the wall. She felt empty as she shivered uncontrollably, her arms and legs trembling with intense leftover charges, gritting her teeth until it passed. Her heartbeat was irregular, the numbness receded from her mouth and tongue.

She pushed her freezing hands into her hair and held her throbbing skull.

“Tasers suck so bad.”

She remembered nothing except trying to get to the subway to lead them on a chase and distract them from even looking for the Volkovs.

This was a strange place for the KGB to bring her. She expected to wake up in some prison behind cell bars, not this open room with one high window behind her and on the opposite wall, two doors, one small and secured with a padlock, the other, a pair of tall, steel-reinforced wood doors.

She leaned back, relaxing her arms, wishing she was with Blitz, wishing she'd had a chance to explain to him. She hated that she messed up. She could only hope she hadn't ruined everything.

She had no idea how long she'd been there, feeling the disorientation and frustration in dealing with her own fate.

Then, suddenly, the outer doors scraped open, shadows breaking behind the figures moving past the entrance. There were three men, two she recognized: the man who had caught her and the driver of the car.

All had Slavic features, attractive, big, and burly, the third man in a T-shirt, his biceps bulging, and he didn't seem to be at all cold. That alone made her heart skip a terror-filled beat. Two of them had dark, piercing eyes, the third laser blue, all filled with purpose. She dubbed them Captor, Driver, and Biceps.

In Russian, Driver ordered her to stand. She didn't want them to know she understood, so she looked at them with confusion.

Captor walked closer to her, and she shrank back, part of it an act, the rest as real as it got. Her body still shook from the aftershocks.

“You do not speak Russian?” he said in English.

She shook her head.

“Stand up,” he said.

“Let's stop with this shit and beat her until she tells us whether or not she knows about the missiles and our attack,” Biceps said. “I volunteer to rape the information out of her. She's quite lovely.”

“Shut up! I'll handle this my way. If we beat her, we might kill her, and rape is a last resort. We do that and she'll never say a thing. I don't want to explain it to Leonid that we killed her and learned nothing. Do you?”

Biceps backed down, but Bree was reeling. Leonid *Olenka? Missiles? Attack? On who?* They weren't KGB. They were *Z Militia*. Oh, God, that was worse. At least with the KGB, she might have had a chance of survival. But now, there was no doubt. The moment she talked. She was dead.

It's a good thing she had no intention of talking. This was the end of the line.

I'm so sorry, Blitz.

"What is your name?"

She said nothing.

"Why did you take the Volkovs? Who are you working for?" She met his gaze, and he made her feel the blood in her veins, the beat of her heart in her throat.

She stared straight ahead.

"You are an American spy."

Bree focused on the far wall. She was in over her head. She'd received no FBI training that would help her resist torture, so all she could do was defy them in her own way. Whatever techniques CIA operatives received, Bree definitely felt the lack of it.

"Secure her."

Biceps walked over to her and grabbed her arm, dragging her to one of the chairs. He pushed her down into the chair and zip tied her wrists and ankles to the wood with a grunt of satisfaction. The plastic cut into her skin.

A fourth man walked in. He was carrying her tactical vest. They had taken both her weapons. He set the vest on the table with a plunk that reverberated against the walls, her pistol and knife visible in the pockets. The locket dangled from his fist. He dropped that on the table, too, along with her meager, stolen subway money.

He kept asking questions over and over. She was protecting her teammates and the lives of the Volkovs, Isabelle, and Aleksei who had the courage to take this step. She could do no less, especially when it meant that anything she gave them would be treason. Even to save her own life.

Captor moved closer, looking her up and down. Sweat pooled at the base of her spine, at her temples. The clamminess of her skin reeked of fear. She was completely helpless and vulnerable. It was the worst feeling she'd ever experienced in her life. Without warning, he backhanded her across the face.

For a moment, she simply sat there, absorbing the pain exploding in her cheek, jaw, and temple, throbbing in time to her accelerated heart.

"You will talk to me."

She worked her jaw and glared, lifting her chin. Dread spiraled through her, but she took a hard breath, her resolve steadfast, her fortitude stronger than ever. She hadn't gotten through life shrinking from confrontation or

allowing anyone to coerce her into backing down from something that mattered to her.

She'd learned the valuable lesson of being strong and determined at a young age, through loss, uncertainty, addiction, and unbridled fear. She wouldn't compromise what she believed in, what she'd vowed. To defend her country against foreign and domestic enemies. She believed in what Isabelle was doing, believed in the might and fighting force of the SEALs, and had been privileged to see their world and fight alongside them.

He didn't like her defiance. He looked at Biceps, his gaze shifting and on the barrel in the corner. Her mouth went dry, her insides liquid. "Get the jug."

* * *

BLITZ WATCHED the land blur past, the darkness making things even less distinct. He wrestled with his thoughts, working to organize them like a rational human being, instead of this wild primal instinct surging through him. The chilling discovery that the man he'd detained was Z Militia reverberated through him.

His fear for Bree increased and he had to push it to the back of his mind, let his training take over. Thoughts of her in danger would compromise any effective thoughts in his head. He took a deep breath and let it go.

Z Militia was tied directly to Leonid Olenska. What was he doing guarding the foreign minister and his family? What was it that Aleksei Volkov was keeping close to the vest? What other secrets did he have in his playboy head?

The blip on the GPS continued to pulse steadily. He wasn't far. He faced the fact that he wasn't firing on all cylinders where Bree was concerned. Gator had tried to stop him, but he had grabbed his bag of gear and jumped out of the van. They had no choice but to leave. He could see Gator struggling with the CIA operative, forcefully keeping him inside before shouting to the driver to go, and Blitz was grateful. They had that special bond of being on their own when he was wounded, and each minute had been a life-and-death struggle.

Gator had saved his life. Blitz could return the favor.

It was ingrained in them from the moment they'd stepped on the Grinder in Coronado for SEAL training. Everything was done as a team. They ate

together, trained together, worked out together, learned together, and did missions together.

Gator's first and foremost thought would have been to make sure Blitz's back was covered. He wouldn't be able to help himself, no matter how wise the decision was. Gator would never have voluntarily let him face this one on his own, but even though he was forced to leave, Blitz knew Gator would have faith in him that he could face incredible odds and accomplish his goals.

They had already succeeded in getting the Volkovs out, now it was onto goals that he would absolutely not fail in achieving.

Get Bree back. Get them out of Russia.

That was all he had in his head right now. They could sort out the rest once he got her back. He pulled off the road not far from her location, hiding the vehicle in the trees. His passenger stirred and with a hard elbow to the temple, he slumped unconscious again. With a length of cord, he wrapped it around the man's neck and tied it to the head rest. This fucker wasn't going anywhere.

He exited the car, grabbed and shrugged into the backpack of gear, and walked through the dense trees until he reached an open field. Across the wide expanse was a barn, lights on and several men walked the perimeter. He went down to his belly and crawled, setting aside his fear for Bree. Just knowing she was this close was enough to make him crazy, but he slid into his training.

Dressed all in black, he was invisible to whoever was watching as he approached the barn, wind blowing across the fields and covering his movements. The walls were stone, two windows that were at least six feet above the ground. He did recon around the whole structure, noted where the guards were and that there was only one exit. Sweet. Something he could breach and an area he could easily control.

He crawled from the field onto the dirt of the road, taking cover behind one of the vehicles. He rolled underneath, set one of his charges, and rolled back out. A little diversionary Centex and a remote detonator. He watched and waited until it was clear, then he ran to the corner of the building, working his way to the doors. He set another charge, then stood back into the gloom of the overhang and blew the vehicle.

There was shouting and yelling, and the three men conveniently moved into his line of vision. Blitz took them out with one shot each. They crumbled to the ground. He ducked to the side and blew the doors.

* * *

BREE WAS SO thankful for the first blast. It stopped Biceps from putting that towel over her face and pouring that full pitcher in his hand over the towel. She knew it as waterboarding, and she was sure it was something she never wanted to experience.

They all turned toward the explosion, Biceps running for the door. He was in the blast radius as a second earsplitting explosion sounded at the entrance, driving one of the wooden doors into Biceps who flew across the room and lay still.

Captor and Driver turned back to her. Stupid move as a figure slipped around the door jamb.

Captor pulled his sidearm and pointed it at her. “They are too late to help you.”

The next moment was a blur as the two men crumpled almost simultaneously to the stone floor, both with head shots.

Her gaze shifted to the figure as he came closer, the smoke clearing.

“Bree.” He rushed to her, pulling his knife, cutting her bonds.

“Blitz?” She swallowed hard, overcome that he had risked everything to come for her. He pressed his mouth to her temple. The warmth of his body engulfed her.

“Can you walk?” he asked roughly, an agony of feeling in his softly spoken words.

“Fuck that,” she said. “I can run if I have to.” She grabbed up her gloves, putting them on over her severely cold hands, returning the weapons where they belonged, then donning the tactical vest.

He chuckled low and soft, the relief in his voice clear, then urged her to hurry to the door.

“Wait,” she said, resisting. She reached out and scooped up the locket, opening it and removing the chip inside that had been concealed under Mila’s grandmother’s picture. She discarded it, tucked the necklace into her vest pocket, and zipped it to keep it safe.

HE SHOULD HAVE his gun up as they moved back through the field, be vigilant. But he could only bask in her presence as she walked alongside him, whole, alive, nothing but a serious black eye and bruised cheek. He wondered if she was as wrecked as he was.

She'd risked her life for the mission without even thinking. He was so torn. He could almost feel himself on some mental edge between rage and relief.

They reached the car, and he stopped in a small grove of trees out of sight of the road and his lone passenger. "This was all my fault," she whispered, her shoulders sinking with resignation.

"How so?"

She pushed her hair back, winced as she brushed against the bruise on her eye, her hands trembling, and he realized she was still scared. "I shouldn't have let my sentimentality get in the way. The locket was bugged with a GPS chip. I put every single one of you in danger." She stopped, her heart in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Callen. You were right. I'm a rookie when it comes to these types of missions." Her voice was hoarse with the sound of her shame. "I don't have the training and I almost died back there."

"But you didn't."

"Only because you came for me." She seemed to crumble, her shoulders sagging for just a moment, then she squared them. Her show of vulnerability, then her small rally did him in. He took one step, then another, and he was on her in a heartbeat, pulling her flush against him. He didn't have to seek, she was there, and he took her mouth, then took more. His relief swelled and he

unleashed it, his hands mapping her contours as the kiss turned raw, primal. She drew him to her, stealing away the last of his defenses, her mouth molded savagely over his. Up to this moment, with her passion flooding over him, he hadn't realized how dead he was inside.

He tore his mouth from hers and drew back suddenly, then carefully removed his hands. He couldn't resist her before, and now... His chest expanded with the realization that he wasn't falling for her anymore, he had fallen against every wall, barrier, rationalization, and defense he had ever thought or built.

Her voice was uneven, and her mouth trembled. "I used to think I didn't really need anyone, that I could survive on my own through anything. I had to, for so many years, be my own protector, my own teacher, my own everything." She released a self-deprecating laugh. "'Fake it until you make it' has always been my motto."

"Bree, everyone makes mistakes. True, in this environment, any mistake can get us killed but it didn't. It's best to leave this to the past and not to dwell on it." It was good advice and he wished he could take his own counseling for a lot of different things. "We survived—"

Her expression brightened. "And I got valuable intel."

His brows rose. "You did?"

"Olenska has missiles and he's going to use them soon."

"What's the target?"

"I don't know. That's all those goons said." She looked around, her arms coming up like she got a chill, remembering what the Z Militia was capable of. "We better get out of here before more of our friends show up. I don't want to meet any more of them any time soon...or forever. But I know that's unrealistic."

He looked back at the barn, deciding that it was time to get the fuck out of here. She was right. Anyone could show up at any moment, and it was prudent to get lost. Their main priority was to get the hell out of Russia as quickly as possible.

But before they left, he had one more problem to solve. He looked at the car.

"Bree. I have a hostage and I'm going to interrogate him, then do what's necessary before we leave." Her eyes widened when she caught his meaning. "Go ahead to the car. I shouldn't be long."

He walked to the passenger door and found his captive awake. He hadn't

moved a muscle. Blitz released the cord around his neck and the zip tie from his ankles and dragged the guy out.

Bree, a mixture of sadness and resignation in her eyes, got into the passenger seat and closed the door.

He walked the man away from the car. Whether he'd had time to think or not, he was in complete survival mode.

"Please, don't kill me."

"What do you know about the location of Leonid Olenska?" Blitz went into SEAL mode, doing away with anything that would weigh on him. He was always ready and willing to kill his enemy.

The man's eyes flashed, realizing that either way he was a dead man. But there was that sliver of hope. "I know that you'll never find him."

"Why is that?"

"He's never in one place."

Blitz didn't say anything, just pulled out his sidearm and screwed on the suppressor. The man swallowed hard. Blitz pointed the weapon down, crossed his hand over his wrist, and waited.

Emotions, fear, and desperation raced across the man's expression. "He'll kill me and my whole family."

"Tell me what I want to know, and I'll let you go." The fear receded, and a sly look replaced it.

"He's on a cargo ship, the *Imperiya*, retrofitted to accommodate him in anything he needs. It's a floating fortress."

"What are his plans for the missiles? Who is his target?"

"I don't know." Blitz shifted and the guy held up his hands. "I swear. I'm just a foot soldier. That's all I know."

The shot was quiet in the dark meadow. Blitz unscrewed his suppressor and stowed it in his vest, then holstered the sidearm at the small of his back. He crouched and cut the man's bonds and dropped the guy's weapon near him, then walked away. His fate was much more merciful than what his buddies had planned for Bree. The moment he reached a phone, he would have had the whole of Moscow looking for them. That threat was neutralized.

When he settled in the driver's seat, Bree stared out of the window. She didn't say anything, and he didn't offer up any details. Best to leave it be.

He started the engine and pulled the vehicle back onto the road.

"Do you...does that—"

"Keep me up at night?" Blitz finished for her.

“Yes,” she said.

He was a warrior, not a sociopath, part of the two percent of the male population who was capable of levelheaded participation in combat without psychological ramifications. Taking a life was never commonplace, but he never hesitated when it came to eliminating his enemy. The act would protect them both, they could get back to Niger and report to Isabelle what they had found out.

This would give them an advantage.

Maybe Volkov knew more information than he was saying, playing his cards close to the vest. Friend or foe? Survivor? Traitor to his country? Maybe the Russian was all those things, but if it hadn't been for him sending them to Moscow to extract his mom and sister, they wouldn't have this information.

He reached out and squeezed her hand. He pressed his tired body into the back of the seat. “No. It doesn't keep me up at night.”

She nodded, accepting what was. She turned to look at him with nothing but gratitude and determination in her eyes. Buck had been right. Bree was a SEAL babe. She was cut from the same cloth as he and his brothers. She squeezed his hand back. He didn't want to examine why she was so deep under his skin. He always went casual, kept it light, held back. He'd never had too many problems with getting those casual relationships. He attributed it to his sisters, each with an opinion she had to share. They taught him early that pleasing most women was simple, and he had mastered making a woman feel special even if it was just for the moment. But Bree wasn't simple at all. She was unique and special all on her own. He felt almost raw around her, and it was damn hard to focus when her smile took his breath away.

Back there when he thought he had lost her, he'd experienced emotions so caveman primitive it scared him. The urge to shelter, protect her had propelled him into battle. His sisters showed him strong women were resilient, often a damn sight more than men. Bree was that woman, who cared deeply about the people caught between terror and their innocent lives.

“I know where we can go to lay low so we can refuel, rest, and plan how to get out of here. It's not without risk and may be a longshot at best.”

He grinned, running his hand through her hair, glancing over as the strands sifted through his fingers. He had been scared for her, but also scared for himself. Losing her wasn't an option, but he needed to get a handle on his need to protect and take her away from danger. Besides, she wouldn't allow it

as she had already demonstrated. “Tell me where to go.”

She inhaled and breathed deeply, overcome that he trusted her implicitly, no doubt. He smiled at her, and she smiled back at him.

They ditched the car on the outskirts of the city and walked for a while until they came up on a large estate tucked back off the sidewalk, surrounded by wrought iron fencing and gates.

Bree took his hand and walked around to the side entrance. At the gate, she took a hard breath. “Be ready to run,” she whispered. She pressed in a code and between one breath and the next, the gate opened, the security light blinking green. “So far, so good.”

She walked toward the luxurious house with carefully landscaped gardens until they reached a door with another security code. She punched in the number again and the light once again went green. “I can’t believe she never changed it,” she murmured. Ducking inside, he followed, closing the door softly behind him.

They crossed the large kitchen into a foyer where lights exploded and several armed guards surrounded them, automatic rifles clicking in unison. Several men shouted in Russian. Blitz raised his hands, but Bree called out, “Sofiya!”

There was utter silence then a voice rang out, speaking rapid Russian. Blitz only caught the name, Breebree.

A beautiful blonde rapidly descended the stairs, squealing. She ran into the foyer, her pink filmy robe swirling around her. She threw her arms around Bree, and they hugged for several moments.

The woman raised her head and glared at her guards. She made a shooing motion and when they didn’t move, she said, “Go away. You’re not needed.”

Finally, to Blitz’s relief, the guns lowered, and the men dispersed. “Bree, what are you doing here?” She eyed Blitz, her eyes raking over him. “And with your very handsome escort.”

“We need your help.”

“Of course, anything.” She took Bree’s arm and dragged her to the opulent living room with an impressive ornate fireplace, thick rugs on the polished wood floor, art and sculptures everywhere. She pulled a bell near the entrance and gestured for them to sit. Bree settled on the brocade sofa and Blitz sat next to her.

An older, somewhat disheveled woman appeared in the doorway. Sofiya said, “Can I get you anything? Coffee, tea, something to eat?”

“We’re starving,” Bree said. “Eggs and bacon, toast?”

Sofiya translated and returned her attention back to them.

“Sorry about waking you and your cook up at this hour.”

Sofiya waved her hand. “I pay her well and nothing is too good for my special friend, Bree. I have missed you so.”

“Me, too.”

Bree turned to Blitz. “This is my...friend, Blitz.”

She nodded at him. “Blitz? Interesting name.” She didn’t press for any information and Blitz relaxed.

“Blitz, this is Countess Sofiya Komarov. She and I met when I was here in Russia as an exchange student in high school. We hit it off and I helped her with her English.”

“It’s very good, yes?”

He nodded with a short laugh and a grin.

She beamed.

“Sofy, we need your help. We’re not exactly in this country legally.”

The delicious smells coming from the kitchen filled the living room and Sofiya leaned forward. “I see. You need passage out?”

“Yes, as quickly as possible...undetected.”

“Where is it that you need to go?”

“West Africa.”

“Hmm, I think it is time for me to take a trip to...ah...Greece. That close enough?”

“That will work perfectly.”

The cook came into the room and motioned to Sofiya. She nodded. “Now that it’s settled, why don’t you eat, clean up and get a good night’s sleep. We’ll plan in the morning.” She rose and talked to her cook. “Eva will show you to your room after you’ve eaten. I will retire.” She hugged Bree again as they all rose. “So good to see you. Our trips are much too short.”

“We’ll have to fix that,” Bree said.

“Good night.”

Instead of making Eva wait for them to eat, Bree told her to head back to bed. She knew the drill. After the delicious food was consumed, Bree took his hand and led him to the stairs—more scrolly wrought iron work, but he was too damn tired to appreciate the architecture.

“Make yourself at home. Sofy keeps all kinds of clothes for all sorts of people.” She flicked a hand toward the closet and chest of drawers. “I’m sure

we can find something to wear. Rummage something for us to sleep in and I'll get the water heated." She hopped on one foot as she pulled off one boot, then the other. Blitz's gaze slid over her, enjoying the curves and swells of her toned body. She had muscled legs and some bruises here and there.

He set his hands on his hips, his tone wry. "Countess, babe?"

"I know." She smirked. "She wasn't a countess when I met her, just as awkward a teenager as I was, eager to learn English and find out about America. Her dad wished it for her and chose me to foster in the country. It's why I have the codes. She never changed them." She smiled softly. "He liked my background. He was a very gracious and lovely man. A good father to her. He died of a heart attack when she was twenty. Her mom died in childbirth." She unzipped the vest and shrugged out of it, then stripped down to her bra and panties. "She's my best friend and indulges me when she comes to DC. Some of the stuff in my closet I could never afford. But I love fashion, so I let her indulge me."

He stripped down to skin and walked over to the drawers. Inside were neatly folded bras, underwear, shirts, pants, and socks. Whatever they needed. The male and female underwear was still wrapped in plastic. Bree might wear someone else's underwear, but he'd rather go commando. Good thing he didn't have to. He found a beautiful blue silk nightshirt and pulled it out and opened one of the packages, grabbed a pair of boxer briefs, and set the garments on the bed.

When he entered the bathroom, the water was running, steam filling the space. She was just standing there at the sink looking at her reflection, but he knew that's not what she was seeing. When he touched her shoulder, she turned and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"You were amazing," he said, quietly. "Let the guilt go."

"Is that an order?"

"Yes." With one hand he unsnapped her bra and she gasped softly, then laughed. "Commando skills?"

"Oh, yeah. Required on the battlefield," he said.

This mission had pushed her hard, he thought, and he admired her resilience. After she discarded her panties, they got into the shower. She wrapped her arms around him as they both stood in the spray. Rousing themselves, they scrubbed off the sweat, dirt, blood, and he felt he lost another layer of himself to her.

Outside the shower, while drying off, Bree's eyes kept going over him

and it took everything he had to keep his hands to himself.

“Keep looking at me like that and we won’t get any sleep, babe,” he said.

She set her hands on his bare shoulders. He slid his hand heavily down her spine, cupped her rear, and meshed her hips to his, his dick hardening.

She hooked her leg around his, sliding it up his thigh to his hip.

“Damn,” he said. Her smile was bone-melting, and he swept his palm from throat to hip, molding her flesh, his gaze lingering over her, naked and shameless for him. Her eyes held awareness of her power, her shape like an hourglass, lush and ripe, wrapping him in her scent and sensation. Blitz felt privileged, every moment he’d ever spent with another woman obliterated, as if those faceless, nameless women had never existed. She touched his face, slid her thumb over his lips. It was a simple thing, but he wanted more of it. He wanted to connect to her deeply and seal the connection tighter.

He slid his hand up her ribcage, crushing back the need to bury himself inside her quickly and appease this wild hunger for her. But it wouldn’t matter. She was more than under his skin. She was inside him. And when her hand closed around him, she took him with her—away from danger and isolation, from ignoring everything for the mission.

“Callen,” she said, almost choking on his name. “I need to—” Her fingertips dipped, her breath hot in his ear. “I need to touch you.”

His hand rested on her belly, then slid softly between her thighs, and he fell apart. His feelings tumbled over each other with the feel of her warm silky palm sliding over his erection.

She sighed when he groaned, drawing in air through clenched teeth.

And a deep, heavy heat coiled through Bree’s body, and she wanted him inside her, pushing her with the power and drive that excited her just thinking about it. The muscles between her thighs were already warm and pulsing, the awareness of him making her beg softly. But he wouldn’t allow it, in command of everything including her.

His mouth rolled over hers, drawing her into him, and Bree fell back against the sink as he left a moist, hot trail down her body, nibbling on her nipples, the slow slide of his tongue dragging lower.

“Blitz, please, inside,” she pleaded, wanting his heat, his energy, the life of him pulsing through her. She arched into him, urging, her hands sweeping wildly over the contours, her fingertips molding to curved muscle and man.

Then her touch slid lower. His stomach muscles contracted instantly as she neared his groin and his moan of pleasure thrummed through her.

“I have no willpower when it comes to you,” she whispered in his ear, his big hands on her ribs, driving anticipation through her.

“Exactly how I feel,” he growled.

He was an experience—something from the tightly guarded places she’d rarely visited. His kiss alone twisted her up in a net, tying her tight. In knots. She didn’t know if she wanted to keep him as close as possible or turn in the other direction.

She cupped his face, devouring his mouth, thrusting her hips enough to put him inside her a bit, and he grunted and cursed, then nudged her thighs wide and slid between. She held herself poised, and a million thoughts ran through her mind, nothing sticking long enough to make sense. She felt freed, her need beyond passion, beyond control.

Bree stared up at him, never expecting to see this man humbled to anything. Yet he was, in his eyes, his expression as if he was questioning everything he knew, and her throat tightened. For the world, the enemy, they saw strength and deadly skill. Bree saw need and an unguarded man. She guided him, loving the exquisite pressure, his gaze trapped with hers, and they prolonged it, her hips rising to his. He sank into her helpless and trembling.

His breath shuddered, almost gasping. “You have no idea what this is doing to me, do you?”

“How can I not?” she said, brushing her fingers across his hair, caressing down the side of his face. Gently she laid her mouth over his, licking the line of his lips, slowly before sliding her tongue between and making them both crazy.

He gripped her hips, his body nail-hard and sliding deeply. Her muscles locked and tightened, and yet she smiled, met him, and thrust harder. Her whispers mingled with the mist from the shower, their secrets bared and unspoken drifted between them.

He enfolded her breasts, thumbing her nipples, and the sight of him disappearing into her tormented her. She spared him nothing.

Her body rippled like the ocean breaking, battering him in sleek waves of pleasure, and she quickened, thrusting longer and harder.

“Oh, Callen,” she said, drawing his name out. She couldn’t breathe, her body beyond her control and his. She came, watching as her surrender broke him. He threw back his head and let go, pumping into her as he cried out.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her to him and she clung to

him. Tomorrow would be precarious, dangerous, and may just take their lives. But she had found something here that had changed her, changed her so profoundly, she hadn't even begun to scratch the surface. It also frightened her more than going into battle, more than losing her life.

This didn't feel temporary at all, but it was. It had to be. She looked forward into the future like she always did when she was overwhelmed, but now, instead of leaving the present, she returned to this moment, this man.

She looked at him as he made love to her. Her heart skipped a beat. A keen awareness of him slithered over her, his scent, his unbelievably piercing green eyes—those big, beautiful hands—and the powerhouse of muscle locking her to him. And she landed hard, the freefalling she'd been doing since she'd met him so long ago in a raucous frat house was now something hard and tangible like the ground she walked on.

It was love.

It scared her down to her soul, to the core of her heart where she had guarded herself for so very long and let go. He meant so much to her. Even though she knew leaving him would cut out her heart, they had an agreement. She would honor it.

Later, lying with him in the dark, remembering how he'd risked his life on her behalf was daunting. He could have been on a plane back to Niger but had instead left the safety of the escape vehicle to stay by her side. She felt humbled, loving him so much it hurt.

“Did you get any info out of your captive?”

“Yes. Olenska is on a cargo ship he's tricked out to live and work on. He does have missiles, but that was all he knew.”

“That's at least more than we had before. Once we get back to Isabelle and Kat, they can start to track down that ship.”

“And Volkov can spill the rest of his secrets,” Blitz said, his tone deadly.

Olenska. He was a filthy rich deal maker, rebel. He had the means to follow through. He didn't have a conscience, but he had a cause. Her blood iced over knowing that she had killed his son and he wanted retribution. He and Anya. Well, let them come. Bree was going to meet them head-on in a clash of the titans. The Olenska's were elusive. While her father was careful to never be seen in a country the US or Britain could extradite him from quickly, he'd slip up. Anya would, too. Bree wanted to be there when that happened.

He knew what rock to slip under and be protected.

Where was that rock?

People didn't die around Olenska, they disappeared. There were missiles and that meant there were targets, but what country would be the unfortunate target?

* * *

LEONID OLENSKA'S PHONE BEEPED. After that fiasco in Moscow where they'd lost the woman, he had sent the photo one of his guys had taken of her when she had been unconscious to Anya. She was going to coordinate the attempt to kidnap Volkov at the Niamey Hotel. Her text came back.

That's the bitch who killed Uri.

As the cool air in the cabin rushed over his heated skin, Anya's words hit him like a sucker punch to the stomach.

He'd had her!

He swore viciously, the loss of his son smoldered beneath the surface of his anger. He'd had her and those buffoons had lost her. Now he knew what she looked like, he wouldn't stop until he had her on this boat where he would slowly extract his revenge while his target burned.

BUCK CONTINUED to listen to Dr. Chiara Accardi. The night was still young after he and the team had been relieved from security duty. He normally didn't go for high-maintenance women, and Chiara was one of those. It was clear she enjoyed his attention. She took pride in her appearance, was very well put together, and smacked of independence. The independence thing he didn't mind. But his aim was mostly to bed her. It'd been a long deployment without many female options and the ones who had come along belonged to his teammates, who were in the hotel bar with him, enjoying a rare moment of relaxation before heading back to the embassy. Gator, Blitz, and Bree were still on their classified mission. He'd feel better once his brothers and their SEAL babe were back in the fold.

“So, what state did you cowboy in?”

“Wyoming.” The forsaken wilderness of Wyoming had filled him with a feeling of solitary awe. The miles and miles of forest were punctuated with craggy outcrops and crystal-clear lakes. There was a raw, wild beauty about it, but there was also a haunting aura of isolation. The silence of the uninhabited wilderness was eerie, almost smothering in its intensity, and many newcomers experienced such an overwhelming sense of loneliness. But to Buck, there was a sense of never-ending space that invigorated him all of his life. He suddenly felt terribly homesick.

“Ooh, that's sexy. You had the whole outfit? Rode horses and branded cattle?”

“Yes, ma'am, I had the whole getup, hat, horse, chaps, boots, lariat, and spurs.”

“You must cut quite a silhouette in all that gear.”

“It’s a working man’s clothes,” he said. He wasn’t unused to tourists ranging around the state and interested in his family’s ranch. So, Chiara, trivializing his way of life, was something he’d heard before. It still didn’t matter. She was beautiful, had all the parts he was looking for, and she was interested in him.

“Surely, Chiara, you can’t be serious with this...this...yahoo?” Dr. Charles Wharton stood at their table. It was clear he’d been hoping for an opening to slide in and stake out the lovely Chiara for himself. He was going to be utterly disappointed.

Buck grinned at the pompous ass, his look saying he would have Chiara in bed before the next hour was up. She had removed her high heel and was stroking her foot over his calf.

“Oh, go away, Charles. I’m busy.” With a sour expression on his face and a scowling, condescending look toward Buck, he released a defeated sigh and marched away.

Buck leaned forward and rested his arms on top of the table. He solemnly studied her for a second, then, confidence in his voice, said, “We’re wasting precious time here, darlin’. You have a perfectly good, private room, and you leave tomorrow. Wouldn’t you like to see an iconic cowboy up close and personal?”

She smiled softly, her cheeks flushing and her eyes flashing, her gaze never leaving his. “You are quite the gentleman charmer.”

“Once that door closes behind us, I’ll show you how charming I can be. Are you interested in that kind of rodeo?”

She released a soft breath as if she couldn’t seem to get enough air. “What kind of rodeo did you have in mind?”

“Oh, the bucking bronc kind.” He rose and after slipping on her heel, she took his hand as he led her toward the elevators.

The doors opened and they went inside. The moment the doors slid closed, she plastered herself to him. She leaned toward him and nipped gently at his bottom lip, teasing him with the promise of something hotter and deeper, sweeter.

“Kiss me, Buck,” she breathed against the corner of his mouth while she brazenly tugged his shirt out of the waistband of his pants so she could slip her hands beneath the warm, soft cotton material.

She splayed her palms on his rock-hard stomach and flipped them

upward. He slipped his hands into her hair and in the next moment he crushed his mouth to hers. When the doors opened, he barely registered it, but got them out. They kissed and touched all the way down the hall until they reached her room.

She opened the door, but before she pulled him in, Dr. Charles Wharton came out of his room with an ice bucket. Buck nodded to him as she dragged him inside.

He laughed silently at the man's shocked face, then turned his starving, sexual needs loose as he pushed the delectable Chiara toward the bed, catching the door with his heel and slamming it in his envious face.

* * *

HARLEY SAT in the conference room waiting for word about the op. Her hands were in her lap and the tension in the room was heavy. She couldn't stop herself from glancing at Aleksei every so often. He looked haggard, worried, working at keeping his impeccable composure. Her eyes caressed his handsome face, the memory of her loss of control in this very room.

Isabelle leaned over and said, "Could I speak to you alone?"

Harley rose and followed Isabelle out. Aleksei tracked her with his dark, tormented eyes. She gave him an encouraging expression and a smile. He relaxed a little.

She entered Izzy's office, but she wasn't behind her desk. She was seated on the sofa. Her coworker was also warring against her own concerns about this mission, not only because Gator was involved, but Bree and Blitz had gone on her recommendation.

"Come sit down," Izzy said.

Harley walked over and folded down into a comfortable chair. "What is this about?"

"Aleksei," she said.

She half-rose. "No—" but Izzy caught her wrist and brought her back down.

Looking down at the table, Izzy leaned forward, her brow furrowed. Harley didn't want to hear what she had to say. She went to go again. There was a brief silence, then she said, exasperation in her voice, "Will you just sit down."

Harley relented with a sigh and sat across from her again. “This had better not be a lecture.”

She looked up and met her gaze, a glint of humor in her eyes. “Maybe a little.”

Harley didn’t say anything as she held Izzy’s gaze, then sighing heavily, she again relented. “All right. What do you want to say?”

Izzy silently considered what she wanted to say. Finally, she looked at Harley. “I should explain some things to you about Aleksei.”

“What things?”

“He and I had an intimate relationship when we were both at Oxford. I have a close and continuous contact filed with the agency.”

“You did?”

“Yes, but the romantic part of our relationship soon ended because I was going into public service, and he was...well Russian and slated for public service as well. I gave him up more easily than I had thought I would. Now I see I was always meant for Gator.” She shook her head as if to clear it. “I wanted you to take this job of turning him because I know how badass you can be and your formidable ability for getting a grip on things, for managing the unmanageable. For my own peace of mind, I wanted someone I could trust with him. He is such a good man and a close friend.”

“Okay, so what is the problem?”

“There is a stronger attachment to him in you, than there ever was in me. It’s not that it didn’t cross my mind he would be a temptation, but I thought you would be immune to his charms.”

“And if you had thought otherwise?”

She considered her question, then raised her eyes and met Harley’s, her expression deadly serious. “I think I would have recommended someone else.”

“Why?”

Izzy shook her head and frowned, and several moments passed before she answered. “Mostly because of you. I don’t think you fully realize what you’d be letting yourself in for—his defection, witness protection, a difficult and draining process to naturalize him to even become an American citizen.”

Harley stared at Izzy. “I’m not a green CIA operative, Izzy. I’m a Shadowguard. It’s not as if I don’t understand what’s at stake here or aware of all those obstacles.” She leaned back and folded her arms across her chest, an unsteady catch in her voice. “I appreciate your concern.” Sarcasm seeped

into her voice.

There was a dispirited slump to Izzy's shoulders, and she hated that her best friend in the world was upset about this almost non-existent affair with Aleksei. She couldn't say she didn't want more with him. But there were so many complications in their way.

"This job is hard enough going it alone."

"I know," Izzy answered, sounding suddenly weary. "The last thing I want is for you to be alone." She sighed and leaned back into the sofa, her face lined with concern. "But I don't want you trapped in something that's going to suck the life out of you. Aleksei doesn't either."

Harley felt as if a tremendous weight were pressing the air out of her. She struggled to keep her voice level. "Don't tell me you talked to Aleksei?"

"I did." That struck her as the closest thing to a betrayal she'd ever experienced with Izzy, and the hurt was so intense that she had to either give way to tears or unleash her temper. She shoved the chair back with such force, it scraped the floor, but she was so angry that she barely noticed. She turned without a word and left Izzy with a startled look on her face.

Harley started for her own office. She needed some privacy right now. As she turned down the hallway, she bumped into Aleksei, who was coming from the conference room. He took one look at her face and caught her arms, his voice low and urgent. "What happened?"

Harley shook her head, fighting to hold back the overwhelming anger.

His grip on her arms tightened and a flinty expression glinted in his eyes. "Did Isabelle talk to you?"

Unable to answer him, she made a helpless gesture with her hands, and his expression turned to one of fury. Swearing hotly, Aleksei released her and was about to storm to Izzy's office when she grabbed his arm and restrained him. He took a look at her stricken face and relented. Exhaling sharply, he opened the door to her office and drew her inside. Catching the door with his elbow, he swung it shut, then leaned against it as he gathered her to him.

She sagged against him, struggling for control, his cheek brushing her hair. He drew in an uneven breath and held her even tighter, his voice unsteady. "Tell me what she said, Harley."

Harley shook her head, still unable to answer him. He caught her under the chin and gently raised her head, forcing her to meet his gaze.

She related the gist of the conversation.

His voice gruff with emotion, he said, "Ever since DC, since you saved

my life at the Lincoln Memorial, and afterward, listened to me like I meant something to you, as if my life wasn't some empty puppetry where my father pulled the strings..." The dark, smoky look in his eyes was so mesmerizing that it was clear he was having a hard time continuing. "I adore you, Harley. I wasn't playing last night."

Slipping her arms around him, she pressed against him, his jaw resting on her temple. His tone was solemn. "But there's a lot of truth in what Isabelle said."

"It's none of her business."

Aleksei sighed and eased his hold on her. "Maybe it isn't, but I have to agree with her. If we were to...take this to a different level...it would be difficult for both of us, but mostly for you."

She was getting tired of hearing about how hard it would be for her, and she stared back at him, her chin lifting stubbornly. "That's not true. You'd be making the most sacrifices. You've lost your homeland, they're going to be hunting you down, you'll have to hide for who knows how long."

His expression changed, and there was annoyance flashing in his eyes. "That doesn't undermine your sacrifices, Harley," he said, his voice a little too quiet. "It's a legitimate concern."

Her eyes narrowed, then indignation took over and her temper flared. "Well, then I guess we don't have to worry about it, if it's too hard."

He stared at her coldly, then brushed past her and yanked open the door. "I can see this was a waste of time."

"Yes, it certainly was."

"Fine."

"Fine."

He gave her one last icy stare and stomped off down the hallway. Harley didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so she slammed the door instead.

* * *

ALEKSEI FUMED as he sat in one of the conference room chairs, the agonizing weight of his sister's and mother's lives hanging on him, bearing him down. He didn't regret defecting or helping the Americans. His sympathy was fully with them. His government was a corrupt machine, and nothing would ever change until they wanted it to change. He didn't believe that was possible.

Harley added another dimension. Until Isabelle pointed out all the obstacles, he was hellbent on getting the woman into his life, but there wasn't much of a life he had to offer her. That was now abundantly clear.

Kat sidled over and settled in the chair next to him. They were currently the only people in the room. "Harley is worth all the trouble," she said.

He came upright and studied the attractive redhead. "How do you know what's going on between us?"

She scoffed and crossed her long legs. "I'm a spy, Aleksei. I read people for a living. Other than your intense worry about your family, and your total dedication to bringing Leonid, his daughter, and the Z Militia to justice, Harley is very much on your mind."

He closed his eyes. "She burns me like the sun," he whispered.

She nodded. "I know that feeling. I had a very difficult courtship of sorts with my husband. He's a Navy SEAL which is a challenge in itself. They're gone so often, and my work took me everywhere until I left the field. I'm only here temporarily to hunt down the people responsible for the Ogdens' deaths."

"So, you have some advice for me?"

"Some friendly advice." She smiled softly. "Don't let people distract you from what you want or from what Harley wants. This is about you. Not about what you do or don't do for a job. I'm not saying true love isn't rocky. It certainly was in my case. You see, my husband is my deceased fiancé's brother."

The door opened on that tidbit, and she smiled, rose and patted his shoulder. Isabelle breezed through with Harley. It was clear they hadn't made up, but it was also clear Isabelle had news. She came up to Aleksei. "Your mom and sister are safe and on their way out of Moscow. We've made arrangements to deposit them on your yacht. Gator and three of the CIA operatives will stay with them."

Relief and joy coursed through him. But then Isabelle bit her lip.

"Something went wrong?" he asked. "Are they hurt?"

"No. They're fine. Blitz and Bree are missing. We haven't heard anything from them in hours."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Isabelle."

"Thank you, but Blitz is a seasoned SEAL and Bree has been exemplary in everything she's done. They're both resourceful. I'm sure they had their reasons." She touched his arm. "Now that the main mission is over. Head

back to your hotel and get your stuff together. Your flight is leaving for you to go back to Moscow tomorrow afternoon. But we're not going to wait for that. We'll have a chopper pick you up in an hour. That work?"

"Yes. Thank you, Isabelle. I couldn't have done this without you. You have been such a good friend to me." Harley notwithstanding, and Isabelle's overly heavy hand in making sure they were aware of the consequences of their actions, she hadn't let him down. His family was safe.

"Harley?"

"Yes?"

"You'll go with him."

She nodded and turned toward the door. It was going to be a long, very long hour.

* * *

BUCK STEPPED OFF THE ELEVATOR, leaving a very sated and satisfied woman in her room. Most of the conference attendees had already left. He headed toward the bar, thinking he could get in one more drink with his brothers. As he reached the lobby, he hesitated. There were several men there, one was at the desk and the hotel employee was nervous, her face drained of all color.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled as he noticed security was absent. The guy at the desk turned to look at him and Buck saw a weapon and reached for his, shouting, "Gun!"

The man fired at him, and Buck dove, hitting the floor hard and sliding behind a half wall. He popped up and fired, clipping one in the thigh. In his line of vision, he saw his teammates lined up behind the cover of the wall. Joker nodded to him, crouched, and slid an automatic weapon across to him. He holstered his sidearm and scooped up the weapon. More men came into the lobby, dressed all in black. These weren't AAL. They were professionals.

They sprayed the lobby and his hiding place with a shower of bullets, but he watched through a hole as a woman and a man ran across the lobby and disappeared into the hallway where the elevators were located.

He turned to look at his LT. "Joker! That was Anya and Achebe. They're going after Alek and Harley!"

* * *

IN THE ROOM, Harley steered clear of Aleksei as she sat in a chair waiting for him to get his belongings, then they were heading to the roof. It wasn't like they didn't have a ton to talk about but now was not the time. They had to get him out of Niger. Once he was safe, she'd address their last argument, but to tell the truth, she was a jumbled-up mess right now.

She had no idea how he really felt about her, and he'd dropped that timebomb. It seemed to detonate every few minutes or so.

Harley stiffened. She could hear the blades of a chopper. She looked at her watch. It was way too early. She sprang from the chair and brushed back the drapes. A gray helicopter lowered to her eye level.

Aleksei came out of the bedroom carrying his suitcase.

"Is that the helicopter?"

"Down! Down!" she said, pulling her sidearm from the small of her back and aiming for the engine. She fired several shots, the first ones shattering the glass, the wind and heat of the desert night blowing into the room. The subsequent ones hit the rotor and it smoked and whined.

She rushed to him, pushed him to the carpeted floor, just before bullets shattered more windows and ripped through the wall behind them. The room plunged into darkness, some of those shots taking out the lights in the room. The door burst open, and his guards came in gunning for her, silhouetted against the light from the hall. She rolled in the dark, shooting both of them before they could even find her. She moved back to Aleksei.

The loudspeaker spouted off in Russian, "Give up, Volkov, and people will be spared."

Two canisters lobbed through the broken glass, and she covered his face, buried in her neck as they popped. The flash grenade burst with light, then a second charge sent smoke and heat boiling through the room, eating air and multiplying till it spread over and up, then exited out the windows. The curtains caught fire.

Harley covered her mouth and looked up, squinting through the haze.

She rolled to her stomach, crawled with him to the hall, then they rose, moving briskly to the staircase.

"Why aren't the sprinklers going off?" Before he finished, water started pouring from the ceiling. She didn't look back to see if the fires were out.

"This way," she said, keeping her hand in his shirt, making it to the door as the elevator dinged and opened. Anya and Achebe stepped out. Harley fired at them, catching Achebe in the shoulder, but Anya moved too fast and

ducked back inside the elevator for cover.

Harley closed the door and used the butt of the gun to break the handle off. She turned to Aleksei, who watched her with shadowed eyes. “Up the stairs, hurry!”

* * *

ANYA IGNORED Achebe and his cursing and set a small knife in the elevator rail, keeping the doors open. She then ran full out down the hall, her legs pumping, determined to catch them. When she reached the door, she jerked hard, but it wouldn't open. She rummaged into the small black bag at her side and pulled out a small charge, set it, and took refuge with Achebe behind a door frame. His arm was bleeding badly, but she didn't give a damn.

She wouldn't let her father down, not when they were so close to their goal. She blew the charge, the sound loud in the hall. The door burst open, and Anya darted through. She started up the stairs, her lungs and legs laboring to reach the roof in time.

She got word that the SEALs were in the stairwell, most of AAL and Z Militia were down. The helicopter was also disabled. She swore, her eyes narrowing as she climbed faster. Achebe lagged behind, but she had no patience or time to wait for him.

She reached the door to the roof and opened it enough to see Aleksei's ride in the distance. She was going to lose him, but killing him just wasn't an option. She holstered her weapon and pulled a long-range gun from a holster strapped to her back.

She stepped out onto the roof and the woman with him, the one who had wounded Achebe, fired at her. She had to duck for cover, swearing in Russian.

The chopper set down on the roof, and Anya peeked out to see them breaking cover and running for the vehicle.

She aimed, quieting her breathing, then she pulled the trigger. She saw Aleksei fall, then the woman was helping him back up. She turned and fired at Anya, who had to duck again, but she'd accomplished her task.

She rose and stepped out as the two gained the chopper and scrambled inside. It took off.

Achebe came through the door and looked around. “You lost him? How

incompetent are you, woman? Your father is going to be angry.”

She turned around and looked at him as the hot breeze of this godforsaken land blew her hair around. She was sick of the heat, the sand, the poverty, and the fucking desert.

She was sick of the Achebe brothers and their One True Believer nonsense, and their whining and incompetence. But they had served their purpose. She holstered the dart gun, the biomarker now embedded in Aleksei’s shoulder. When they wanted to find him, they would.

They had forty-eight hours before it dissolved.

She pulled her sidearm and shot the AAL leader through the head, then crouched down and said, “*Dosvidaniya.*”

She rose and ran to the edge of the roof and was ready as the SEALs burst through the door. She clipped on her carabiner and quickly descended to the ground where a vehicle was waiting. As their faces appeared over the edge of the roof, she flipped them off with a smirk, and ran to her waiting ride.

THE CHOPPER CAME in for a landing at the US Embassy compound, Alexsei gritting his teeth against the pain in his shoulder. He tried to slow his breathing, tried to slow the pounding of his heart, and prepared himself for the coming confrontation. What had transpired in the hotel room was just the opening volley. Olenska couldn't afford to let him run free. He had to know what he had told the Americans.

He didn't know when or how, but it was coming. Olenska always got what he wanted.

There was so damn little justice in the world, but he would take what he could when the time was right. He closed his eyes on a harsh breath and focused on the moment at hand.

Even though they weren't on the best of terms right now, she leaned toward him as if she was still trying to protect him. He could smell her, the soft fragrance of her skin, mixed with cordite and smoke and the edge of her surrender to all the wrong things, like fear and exhaustion.

"Are you all right?" he asked. She turned to look at him, her river-rock gray eyes unsettled. Her jaw was clenched tight, her gaze intent as she searched his face for any signs of trauma.

She moistened her dry lips with her tongue and nodded, but she gave herself away when she shivered.

He wasn't in much better shape, shaking like a damn leaf. He had never been in any kind of firefight. He was a diplomat, and his choice of weapon was his silvery tongue. He'd always been able to talk himself out of almost anything, but he'd come to the end of the line here. Olenska was gunning for

him with real bullets and with real intent to do him harm.

The chopper circled, and he saw that the embassy compound was lit up. Distracted for a moment, he looked out the door and noticed the large number of people surrounding the area, wondering what was going on. She leaned a little to look out, pressing her torso against his, catching the curious look she flashed at him. Why all the people?

Pain shot sharply through the wound and the surrounding area. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, breathing deep and slow, soft and easy.

Harley had done a quick patch-up job on the way back. He was in awe of the way she had saved his ass and gotten him to the roof, even when his own bodyguards had tried to take him out. He shouldn't have been surprised they were Z Militia. There was no doubt in his mind that Olenska knew about him defecting to the West. He was bolstered by the fact that his mom and sister were out of Moscow, but it remained to be seen whether or not they were out of Olenska's reach.

Harley didn't waste any time in getting him inside the embassy. There were more Marine guards and the tension in the air was tight. Something was going on.

As soon as they entered Isabelle's office, she rose from the desk and came up to them. "What happened?"

"Anya and Achebe attacked the hotel. She had Z Militia and AAL fighters with her. Olenska knows. We barely got away, and Aleksei was hurt."

Isabelle rushed to the phone and punched in numbers. "Get me the doctor."

Harley helped him into a chair. He asked, "What is going on with all those people outside the embassy?"

"There's been a coup d'état. Presidential Guard commander, General Abdoul Aziz Abdou has taken over and proclaimed himself the leader of a new military junta government. I've made them angry and they're expelling us from the country. President Umar, his wife and children asked for refuge, and I granted it. After all that we have worked so hard for together, I couldn't deny them my help. The new government wants them back, so we're in a bind here. I've ordered a total evacuation.

"Okay, what are we going to do with Alexsei?"

"Same plan. They haven't sealed off Niamey's airport yet. You and Alexsei will get back on the chopper and catch a waiting private flight to

Athens's Port of Piraeus where his yacht is docked." She switched her gaze to his. "That is where your mom and sister are heading."

"What about you and the president?" Harley asked.

"The president and his family are already on the way to the airport. They will be flown to DC. I'm staying until everyone is evacuated, then the CIA reps, the SEALs, and I will be going to a CIA safe house in Athens. I've sent the Fly Team back to DC as well."

The doctor entered and Isabelle nodded to Aleksei. With help from Harley's gentle hands, he removed his jacket and shirt. The doctor inspected the wound while Aleksei endured the pain. "Looks like you caught a ricochet. There is no bullet present. We just need to stitch you up," the doctor said.

There was a clatter in the hall and Joker, Professor, Buck, D-Day, Zorro, Bear, and Flint crowded around the doorway.

Joker entered. "Good, you made it."

"Anya?" Harley asked.

"Bitch got away," Professor said, his voice clipped. "Achebe is dead. We think she offed him." He looked at Isabelle, his features softening. "Julia?"

"She's safe and on her way to your place in San Diego."

Professor breathed a sigh of relief. "Good."

"Joker," Isabelle said. "Could you and the guys help Hollywood with the rest of the evacuations? Then we're headed to Athens."

"Copy that. Gator, Blitz, and Bree?"

"Gator will meet us in Athens. No word from Blitz or Bree yet, but we've been monitoring the Moscow news. There are no reports of their capture or arrest."

Joker nodded. "Blitz is resourceful. They'll be all right."

She nodded. Now that the preliminary orders were given out, the SEALs left. Another kind of tension filled the room, their respective fights hanging over the three of them.

He was going to open his mouth and start a conversation to maybe ease some of that tension, but Isabelle's phone rang. It was a short conversation.

"Your chopper is here." She walked up to him. "Aleksei. I got news. Your father is dead. The official statement is he died of a heart attack. I'm so sorry, Alek."

He felt a sharp pain in his chest. He hadn't thought it was going to hurt, but it did. He could only wish things had been different with his dad. He nodded. "Thank you for telling me, Isabelle." He resigned himself to the fact

that he had done what his conscience dictated, glad that his mom wouldn't have to endure her husband's abuse ever again.

She squeezed his arm. "I'll see you in Athens," she said curtly. "Stay safe."

"Isabelle," Aleksei called out and she turned around. "The same for you. Don't do anything too heroic." His voice was low, his words heavy with the emotion trapped in his chest.

She gave him a wan smile, then turned and left.

He looked at Harley, but she was watching Isabelle's back with a kind of deep sorrow that twisted him up inside. He had put this wedge between them, and he regretted it. But he couldn't regret his feelings for Harley. They were too strong, too real, and simply too dangerous...for her.

Maybe he should persuade her to get out while she was still alive. As much as it pained him, he couldn't bear it if he lost her...was responsible for her death.

"Maybe I should go to Athens alone. You should stay here, Harley. Help Isabelle, then go back to DC."

Harley froze. Only for a second, but it was telling. To Aleksei, anyway. She simply stared at him and abruptly dropped her guard. She was tired. But, if he wasn't mistaken, she was also more than a little unsettled. She was dealing with him on two fronts: his protection, and her feelings for him. Her argument with Isabelle told him that much. She wouldn't have fought with her best friend and coworker over him if her feelings weren't strong. Perversely, that made him happy, but he still wanted her out of the picture, especially when Olenska found him.

"You can forget it, Volkov, and stuff your concern. I have a job to do and I'm going to do it, regardless of your attempts to get rid of me." She jerked her chin toward the door. "Let's go."

He found himself smiling.

"I am armed," she reminded him flatly when he passed her.

"I'm just touched by your concern."

She grabbed his arm, and he winced as the pain, a dull ache thanks to the doc's ministrations, reminded him he'd been shot.

She eased up, shooting him a sideways glance, and he was surprised to see the flash of real anger, not just irritation. He doubted she was more angry with her reaction to him than anything else, and he understood that reaction all too well.

“Harley—” he started, wanting to clear the air, but by the set of her chin and the look in her eyes, she wasn’t going to give him an opportunity.

“Can it. We don’t have time for this.” She glanced at him, then shifted her gaze firmly back to the winding hallway.

“We have an almost four-hour plane ride. I’ll wait.”

She snorted at that, then looked almost surprised at her own outburst. “Good luck with that,” she said, shifting uncomfortably, possibly feeling his steady regard.

He didn’t look away. Couldn’t, actually. She was just so beautiful and tough. Maybe if he could get through to her about how he felt about her as his bodyguard, he could find a way to take her out of his present and set her in his past—to protect her.

“I don’t need luck,” he said, and she reacted to his confident tone as the corner of her mouth quirked for a split second.

She looked at him, clearly as determined as he was. “Yes, you will. You don’t really know me, Alexsei. There’s a reason they assigned me to you.”

“Immune to my charms?”

“No, just immune to anything that interferes with my job.” She wasn’t looking at him, and her tone was flat and hard. But he saw the tremor in her jaw, the vein standing out in stark relief along the side of her neck, and the white knuckles gripping the sleeve of his jacket.

“You’re in the worst trouble of your life and you can’t talk yourself out of it with that golden tongue. You need a keeper,” she said. “You may think you’re going to protect me by getting me off this assignment, but you’re dead wrong. I have the resources to help you get out of whatever it is you’ve gotten yourself into with Olenska.”

His heart skipped a beat. She wasn’t going to leave him, and he couldn’t help but feel better about it, even if he still feared for her life.

“You don’t know what you’re up against,” he said quietly.

She swung her gaze to his, and there was no mistaking the fatigue, determination, and the healthy dose of confidence he saw there. His admiration for her rose ten-fold, and he just wanted to get her someplace private.

“Don’t underestimate me, Aleksei. Others have and it didn’t end well for them.”

“Oh, I don’t intend to underestimate you, Harley. I find you devastating to all my senses and if you think I wasn’t sincere two nights ago when I was

deep inside you, you're mistaken. Don't underestimate me."

"Meaning what?" she asked, her chin lifting a couple of beautiful inches. Damn, he loved her spunk.

"Meaning we have unfinished business, you and me."

"We don't have any business. We never really did."

"Oh, we do." His grin was slow, but it kept on growing until he saw color heat her cheeks. "I'll prove it to you."

Harley's response was to just propel him faster. The heightened emotions of the past few days, coupled with the rage building inside her at even his suggestion that she withdraw to safety. She was a Shadowguard. She didn't retreat from anything. Of course, it wasn't all professional. Her personal attraction to him was debilitating and inconvenient. When he'd gone down on the roof, she'd nearly lost her shit and that wasn't good. She needed to be detached to protect him, not panic. The whole situation was unbearable.

"Harley—"

Everything fused together in that moment to form one huge outburst of fury. Frustrated by the entire situation, along with her helpless attraction to Aleksei, made everything all the more complicated. "Don't try to sweet talk me, Alek. It won't work!"

He stopped dead in the hallway, jerking her to a stop and was in front of her a heartbeat later. It wasn't until he pulled her into his arms that she realized her eyes were stinging. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

She pushed at him, not wanting his sympathy. At the moment, the anger felt good, energizing, as though she was finally coming out of a long daze and taking action. "I'm going to stay pissed."

He let her move back a space but kept his hands on her arms. "That's okay. Just don't let it make you do anything stupid."

"I've already done plenty of stupid stuff around you." She slipped from his grasp and started down the hall again. "Please, just don't talk." She'd lost her mind over him. She knew it and he knew it. She could lie to herself and say she could resist him, but a lie it would be.

He was irresistible, larger than life, cocky as hell, and pulling her right back into that same sexual fog he'd woven the night she'd given into her attraction.

She was surprised and relieved he heeded her request. His silence lasted through their trip from the embassy to the airport. But the moment they settled in their seats and the plane took off, he said, "Harley. I don't want to

fight with you. Just consider staying on this plane and getting the hell away from me.”

“I’m not having this conversation again. The answer is still no.”

High color slashed across his cheekbones, and his lips flattened into a grim line. She rose and started for the back, not knowing where she was going or why. She knew she just had to get away from him.

But he followed her as they stopped in front of a cushy sleeping couch that had been pulled out in anticipation of their needs. She dragged her attention away from it. His gaze raked over her, then as if he couldn’t help himself, down the length of her body, taking in her tight-fitting tank top and stretchy black pants in one angry glance, making her feel as though he’d stripped her naked. His eyes lingered on her chest, and in response, her breasts swelled, and her nipples tightened against the tank top’s built-in bra.

He made no attempt to conceal his hot, hungry gaze, or the sudden erection straining against his pants.

He clasped her arms. “Tell me you’ll leave me, Harley,” his voice broke, his breathing ragged. “Tell me now. Promise it.” His intense gray eyes had turned a darker shade, like an approaching storm. They bored into her, searing her with that burning plea.

“No,” she said, releasing an exasperated huff, her breath coming in short spurts. She shook her head, knowing that leaving him didn’t have a damn thing to do with her job. She couldn’t abandon him now. She didn’t think she could ever do that, even to her dying breath.

He was so tantalizingly close, and all her words melted in the heat of his presence. The male scent of him overwhelmed her thoughts, aroused her body, and created a heavy tingling sensation between her thighs. The man’s ability to turn her on, even during a confrontation, was nothing short of amazing. Then again, Aleksei was so fucking sexy he’d been a part of her most erotic fantasies for months.

He didn’t reply, just glared and remained quiet, emanating a sexual kind of tension that seemed to increase with each passing second between them.

“You know I can’t, Aleksei,” she whispered, resisting the urge to reach out and touch him. “I can’t leave you.” She closed her eyes. “Aleksei... Alek,” she breathed. She wanted him beyond reason, there was no sanity involved. He was foreign, exotic, with deep-seated courage and an unbendable, principled mind. He was muscle and strength and power. And all of him charmed her down to her toes.

He released a string of Russian, his words jumbled and too fast to decipher. In a lightning-quick move, he lunged at her, buried his fingers in her hair, and pressed her against his hard, undeniably aroused body. With a low growl broadcasting frustration and urgent need, he slanted his mouth across hers and sank his tongue deep, kissing her just as recklessly as she kissed him back. His mouth promised sin and wild pleasure, and she matched him stroke for stroke, chasing his tongue with her own, letting him know that she was with him all the way.

The feverish intensity between them was sizzling hot, the strength and immediacy of her arousal making her knees weak. She slid her arms around his waist and skimmed her hands down to cup his butt, squeezing. The muscles tightened under her palms, and the long, hard length of him pushed insistently against the crux of her thighs. She felt the bite of his belt buckle against her, but she was too swamped with desire and need, coiling tighter and tighter with her to care about it.

With his lips still devouring her mouth with forceful, totally overwhelming kisses, he shoved the hem of her tank top up impatiently, baring her naked breasts to the cool air of the cabin. She shivered and moaned as his big, warm hands closed over her breasts, rubbing and massaging her, rolling her hard, sensitive nipples between his fingers.

He broke their kiss, lowered his head, and closed his mouth over her taut, aching breast. He laved her nipple with his tongue before nipping with his teeth, then sucked her strong and deep, until she felt that same seductive pulling sensation in the pit of her belly. An electric jolt zapped through her, exploding in heated ripples that thrummed across her nerve endings.

Her skin tingled everywhere, hot and alive with sensation. She twined her fingers in his soft, thick hair, feeling breathless and dizzy and unable to do anything but hold on, let him have his way with her body, and give into the tension that had built from their last encounter.

He wedged his foot against hers, widening her stance. One hand left her breast and slid down her ribs to her belly. Reaching the waistband of her pants, he delved inside.

She sucked in a quick breath, and her heart raced in anticipation as his hand slid between her thighs and his mouth returned to hers, hot and hungry and demanding, allowing her no escape. His fingers skimmed along her skin, delving deep and gliding along her hot, swollen core.

He slipped a finger easily into her, followed by a second that seemed too

much to take all at once. She moaned into his mouth, her hand tightening in his hair as his thumb pressed against her clit, right where she needed his touch the most, both soothing and arousing her at the same time.

He pushed deeper, filling her, and her inner muscles clamped tightly around his fingers. She panted for air, wanted more of him, so much more.

His big body shuddered, and he buried his face against her neck, his ragged breath hot and damp against her skin. In Russian, he said, “So beautiful, so ready for me.” He pushed her pants and underwear off her, setting his foot in the center and lifting her until she was clear of them. He kicked them away.

His mouth at her throat, he said, “Strip me. I’m naked for you anyway, Harley. Utterly helpless. My little mouse.”

She reached for his shirt and pulled it off him, then unbuckled and unzipped him carefully, shoving his briefs and jeans down to his ankles as he kicked them off. When she came back up, she couldn’t resist his full, thick erection. Her tongue licked him from his balls to the tip and he arched his hips into her mouth on a hoarse cry. She took him into her mouth, and he thrust uncontrollably, once, twice until he growled and dragged her up his body. “I won’t last that way, and I want inside your hot, beautiful body to fuck you until you come.”

He pushed on her chest, backing her against the couch. Her knees hit the edge and she folded down. Before she could catch her breath, he pushed her legs wide apart, his mouth clamping to her pulsing, aching core.

The pleasure was sharp and riveting, stealing her breath against the most erotic sensation. Unable to hold back, she immediately climaxed, her cry deep in her throat, arching sinuously against his mouth as she came in a burning wave that shook her entire body.

Without giving her a chance to fully recover from her orgasm, he moved up over her, the slide of his muscled body against hers making her pulse leap higher and faster. She reached down to touch him, and when her fingers slid over the broad, velvet head of his dick, he sucked in a hissing breath. Grasping both of her wrists, he pulled her arms up and pinned them above her head, giving him complete control of the situation.

He settled more fully on top of her, his thighs forcing hers farther apart, and then he was pressing his erection intimately against her, nudging his way in, stretching her, setting her body on fire. She caught a glimpse of his dark, fierce expression before he crushed his mouth to hers and kissed her deeply,

passionately as he buried himself to the hilt in her slick heat, possessing her completely.

Their moans mingled and once he began to move, she lost all train of thought, reveling in the strength of him, molding her hands over his ropey muscles, merging and meshing with him on a level she'd never experienced before.

He plunged into her fast and deep and strong, a rich seductive rhythm that pulsed as vitally as their hearts. She lifted her knees high against his waist to give him the deepest access possible, his penetration fulfilling a primal need in her, she wanted more. His hips ground against hers with each driving, impaling thrust until she felt him go rigid and his lower body arched into her high and hard, pushing her up and over yet another crest. She came again in a dazzling climax of delirious speed and hot sensation.

When she came back to herself, she found him watching her, his black lashes thick over his darkened gaze, locking with hers. He started to move again, rolling his hips hard against hers, then plunging in deeply. Again, and again. Long, slow, agonizing strokes designed to make the pleasure last.

He lowered his head and captured her nipple, sucking her hard as he thrust. She felt the change in him as his pace quickened, releasing her nipple with a hard groan. He pumped harder, faster. She dug her fingers into the rippling muscles of his damp back, careful of his shoulder, arching helplessly into his thrusts, and felt him stiffen as his climax peaked. Pleasure streaked across his face, blossomed in his eyes as his mouth opened on a ragged, primitive growl, spilling himself into her.

Breathing hard, he buried his face against her throat, and she threaded her fingers through his long hair, giving him time to recover. A few minutes passed before he finally lifted his head from the curve of her neck. In the dim light, his features were shadowed, but there was no mistaking how overwhelmed he was.

He stared down at her, his heart in his eyes. "Don't leave me, Harley. *Please. Don't.*" His agonizing plea cut through her, baring herself to this beautiful man as he exposed his vulnerability to her. He touched her in a way no man ever had—physically and emotionally.

She'd never had any intention of leaving him, before and now. It was just an impossibility. She'd rather die defending him than live without him. That might make her a fool, but it also made her his woman and wholly, and unequivocally human.

BLITZ HAD LEARNED to be a light sleeper, made more so by his military training. He'd learned to always be alert, anticipate danger, and react to the slightest sounds, even while he slept. Especially when he slept. Because that's when he was most vulnerable to the enemy.

The first sound of Bree's whimper brought him completely awake. She twisted and turned next to him, obviously in the throes of a nightmare. He knew all about those.

When she cried out in her sleep, twisting in terror, he gathered her against him. She was damp with perspiration. He gave her a gentle shake. "Babe, wake up," he said, trying not to jostle her too badly.

She awoke with a start anyway. Eyes wild with terror, she bolted out of his arms and upright in bed, her breathing ragged. Her entire body was tense, and her fists clenched in the sheet, as if she was ready to defend herself.

He stroked a hand down her back in an attempt to soothe her. "Hey, you okay?" he asked softly.

It took her a moment to realize where she was, then she raked a hand through her tousled hair and exhaled a harsh breath. She turned into his arms, her body shaking. He clasped her tight. "It was just a bad dream, babe."

She nodded, as if that gesture would dispel the internal demons still lingering in her mind.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Her expression turned grim. "Not really. It was just residual fear from yesterday. I know that."

"Yeah, that's the stuff that gets you."

“Do you have nightmares?”

“I used to have them more often, but it’s gotten easier to handle.”

“Distract me. Tell me about BUD/S. You promised to if I asked.”

He nodded. “Even though I played football most of my life, I didn’t understand the meaning of the word ‘team’ until I joined the Navy. My training was the beginning of a bond deeper than I believed was possible.”

“The first eight-week phase of BUD/S is a nonstop study in physical conditioning and is definitely the toughest of the phases. It’s push-ups, sit-ups, and burpees as endless as sand grains on the Coronado Beach and as relentless as the cold and wet that gets blasted by waves and hoses and seeps into your bones and drenches your spirit in discomfort and misery.

“It’s sleep deprivation and log PT and brutal instructors determined to weed out those who can’t cut it. It’s beach runs and calves on fire, two-mile ocean swims, frigid water, unforgiving currents and was-that-a-fucking-shark doubletakes.

“It’s timed obstacle courses, drown-proofing and shooting hundreds of thousands of rounds and having your brothers’ backs and your brothers having yours. It’s hauling a 110-pound rubber raft over your head with five other guys until your arms burn and quiver and buckle and then digging deeper and hoisting it up again.

“It’s tossing your boat into punishing waves and paddling like hell, trying to beat an impossible time limit. Then it’s filling it with sand and repeating the whole process when you lose, driving home that ‘it pays to be a winner.

“It’s the sunrise and sunset until you’re so determined day after day, realizing this is me, this is my calling, this is what I was born to do, *knowing* you’re that winner and fuck the bell, the cold, the instructors, the boats and logs, the obstacle course, the ocean and Hell Week, because you’re not quitting. You’re never quitting.”

“Oh, my God. That sounds so intense.” She rubbed her hands over his ribs. “Why do you think it was different from football?”

“The stakes are far higher than missing a pass or losing a game. It’s about life and death, being part of something bigger than yourself. I didn’t want fame and fortune. That all seemed hollow to me. I wanted my life to mean something, to do something extraordinary. I’ll leave all that football stuff to those guys who make it their life’s dream.”

“It was never your life’s dream?” she asked solemnly.

“No, it was my dad’s.”

“You said he never understood.”

“To this day. He makes it difficult for me to go home, to be with my mom and sisters. For us to be a family.”

“I’m sorry. I can sympathize. My mom didn’t want me to be an FBI agent. She shows her disapproval every time we meet.”

“Being a SEAL, BUD/S—all of it was easier than telling my parents. Relationships make things more difficult. People who think they know what’s best for you making it impossible for you to live your dream. How screwed up is that?”

“That’s why you want to keep it casual between us, because it’s hard?”

“No, Bree. That’s not it. I fell in love with a woman...Amy, who promised me that she could handle the separations and the danger I was in, but when I got wounded, she wrote me a letter while I was still in the hospital and broke it off.”

“Wow, that’s cold. I couldn’t do that to someone.” Her tone was just as vehement as the fire flashing in her eyes—all on his behalf. “But as painful as I’m sure it was, it’s better that she knew her own limitations. Just terrible, awful timing.” She looked away. “I broke up with my college boyfriend because he couldn’t understand what I wanted to do with my life.”

He should have known Bree would understand, and he experienced a huge amount of relief that she’d jumped to his defense. “If he wasn’t on board, he wasn’t ever going to be. You did yourself and him a favor by ending the relationship, just as Amy did for me by ending ours before I’d grown to resent her constant demands to give up something that was such a huge part of my life.”

Bree reached out and circled the tips of her fingers around his bullet holes, her gentle, intimate touch a balm to his soul. “These warrior scars... Callen. They’re a part of who you are and what you do, and always will be.”

She understood so much about him, and her acceptance mattered more than he could say.

“I realized then that I needed a sure bet, someone who really understood what it meant to be a SEAL’s partner, someone who will handle things much better than Amy.”

“I totally understand that, Callen. I do.”

“Regardless of what reality we have to deal with once your assignment is over and my deployment is up, I care for you, Bree. More than I can say. You’re going back to your job in DC and I’m heading back to Coronado. We

both are aware that the distance poses an issue, finding time to build something when we're not even in the same zip code really doesn't work. At least, not for me. I wish...things were different, but I don't duck reality. It just bites you on the ass anyway."

That was the stark, unvarnished truth. There was no way to reconcile his feelings for her and keep doing what he was doing, but surprisingly, this woman's opinion mattered to him. It dawned on him why he'd fought so hard to keep his attraction to her under wraps and off his radar. His subconscious had obviously known what his emotions hadn't been ready to face or accept—that this woman who challenged him at every turn, and who gave herself so openly and generously both physically and emotionally, could very well be the one for him.

He felt lighter and freer than he had in years, and Bree was the reason. He glanced at her, met her soft amber gaze, and wanted to tell her everything he'd just discovered himself and how much he wanted her to be a part of his life, but the obstacles were just too daunting.

That truth was he wanted a woman in his life, not halfway across the country. That wasn't a relationship, and it wouldn't be fair to either of them if they sugar-coated a relationship between them, thinking it would work. He was pragmatic enough to understand it wouldn't.

That hurt like hell. He had a feeling she was going to sit on his heart like a lead weight for the rest of his life.

After Amy, he had learned the lesson he thought would sustain him: guard himself from any more pain and loss by keeping any woman at a distance until he was sure she would measure up to what he needed in his life. And, so far, those barriers and his rules had served him well and had kept his heart protected.

Until now. Until her. Until Bree.

Until she broke all the fucking rules, and his heart hadn't been able to do anything about it.

Taking a deep, uneven breath, he rested his head against hers, wishing he knew how to say all the things that needed to be said.

"I really, really like you, too," she said softly. "Because I do, I wanted to tell you something that I've never revealed to anyone close to me."

"What's that?"

"I used to self-medicate with alcohol, starting when I was eight."

He lifted up and looked at her. "Damn," he whispered, his heart hurting

for the little girl she'd been.

"I'm finding it less and less compelling since I've known you, learned to lean a little. Thank you for that."

He smiled. "I like the way you lean," he murmured.

She smiled.

Her words touched him. He waited for the feeling to ease, then said, his voice gruff. "Well, I did save your life a couple of times. So, you kinda owe me."

She gave him a shaky laugh, her brows lifted. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, what are you going to do about it?"

"How about I wash your back?"

He gave her a disappointed look. "Just my back?"

She pretended to think for a couple of minutes. "Well, you did save my life *twice*, so..." Her eyes raked down his body. "Let's see what comes up between us."

She threw the sheet over his head, and he heard her giggle as she ran to the bathroom. ***

Dressed and ready to face their escape from Moscow, Bree sighed at the beautiful clothes in Sofy's closet. She'd chosen something very serviceable. A pair of black leggings, a white T-shirt, a gray sweatshirt hoodie with pockets, and her cleaned black boots, nondescript and good for running. Blitz had chosen similar clothes. Black cargo pants, a black T-shirt, and a lightweight black windbreaker.

Just as she put the last of her personal belongings in a small backpack Sofy had in one of the closets, her friend came running into the room.

"You've got to go. Now!"

"What happened?"

"I don't know. They seem to know who you are, Bree."

"What? How do you know they're coming for us?"

"I have many friends everywhere. We need to get you to the airport now, before I arrive." She rushed down the stairs with them right behind her. She continued on through the house. She stopped at a door. "Go through that door and into the garage. Get into the black Ferrari and sit tight." She hugged Bree hard, her tone uneven. "I'll get you both out. I promise. Just do what the driver says."

When Sofy let her go, she ran off. Blitz grabbed her arm before she opened the door. “You trust this woman, Bree?”

She didn’t even have to think about it. They were kindred souls and had hit it off as teenagers, their friendship one Bree cherished. Sofy would never betray her. “Yes, not only with my life, but with yours too.”

She turned the handle, went through, located the black car and she and Blitz jumped inside as the garage door started to roll open. Moments later someone settled into the driver’s seat. It was Eva, but she looked so different. Her hair pulled back, dressed casually. Her eyes were piercing in the rearview mirror.

“Ah, you’re more than the cook,” Bree said.

“I do what my Sofy needs done.” She gave them a warning look. “Buckle up,” she said. “This is going to be fast.” They just had enough time to secure the straps before the engine revved and when she punched the accelerator, they were pushed back into the seat.

Eva hadn’t been kidding. The car moved at an astonishing pace, and they were soon at the airport. Eva used a pass card to open the gate and they zoomed through.

She drove the vehicle directly into a large hanger. A private jet sat not far from the structure. “Follow me,” she said as she opened her door and walked briskly toward a small office. “Stay in here until I come for you and be quiet.”

The door closed and Bree went to the small window that overlooked the gate, plane, and runway. After about fifteen minutes, a black limo pulled through the gate, followed shortly by two black Mercedes SUVs. Sofy’s driver opened her door for her, and she slipped out, looking magnificent in a pretty pink suit with kicking gray leopard heels.

One of the men walked up to her and said something. She turned with a frown on her face. He spoke to her, and she stiffened, then gestured toward the limo. The driver stepped forward, but she waved him back, then folded her arms.

The SUV driver and the passenger searched the limo. They then looked toward the plane and words were exchanged again. By this time, Sofy was looking angry and put out. She nodded curtly and several guys got out of the second SUV and converged on the plane. They all disappeared inside.

After several moments passed, they all came back out. The guy walked up to Sofy and questioned her some more. She glared at the man and shook

her head over and over. The man looked frustrated and annoyed. He and the others stalked back to their vehicles and sped out of the lot.

As soon as they were out of sight, Eva opened the door and said, "Hurry." She jogged through the hangar with them on her heels. Once she reached the stairs to the plane, she ushered them on, then pulled up the stairs. As they came into the main passenger area, Eva slapped her hand against the door. "Go!" she ordered.

The engines revved and the plane started to move while Blitz and Bree were settling into their seats.

Bree looked out the window as the plane took off, lifting into the sky. They were on their way out of Moscow. Bree leaned over and squeezed Sofy's hand. "I'm sorry about all this, about putting you in this position."

"Cretins. All of them," she said with disdain. "They couldn't find their asses in the dark with both hands."

She accepted the mimosa that Eva handed her, offering one to both Blitz and Bree. Bree and Blitz chuckled softly. Her Russian accent only added to the amusing words. All of a sudden, Bree didn't feel the need to cope with alcohol. She looked over at Blitz. He declined as well.

"We will be touching down at a private landing strip. You will be able to contact your people so that they can get you out of Greece. My tycoon friend can put you up for as many nights as you need on his modest estate. He's very discreet." She blushed slightly.

Bree gave her a knowing look and Sofy waved her off, then smiled softly.

Just under four hours and they were back on the ground being shown into nothing short of an impressive, tiered estate tucked near the ocean, the water a glorious turquoise blue that took her breath away. Sofy's tycoon was a devastatingly handsome Greek who went by Christos, dark hair, cobalt blue eyes, and the charm to match.

He hugged Sofy and ushered them inside, telling them to make themselves at home. Blitz wasted no time in using Christos's phone to put a call into the embassy, but there was no answer, just a recording that the embassy was closed.

He then called Joker's cell phone. He answered immediately.

The conversation was brief as they learned what had happened and that effectively the US no longer had a presence in Niamey. Joker promised to send a car for them to take them to the safe house. He also explained what had happened with Aleksei.

Saying goodbye to Sofy was so hard, but Bree promised she would get together with her next month, agreeing to come back here, to Greece and spend time on Christos's gorgeous estate.

They arrived at the safe house, a building with a series of apartments that could accommodate Isabelle, Kat, their CO Hollywood, and the team. There were boisterous hellos and a lot of ribbing and back-slapping for Blitz and hard hugs for her. Bree warmed at the affection and relief to have them back.

One of the apartments had been reserved for a ready room and they all filed in. Isabelle said, "Aleksei has been reunited with his family and they are currently docked at the port." She looked at Bree and Blitz. "I know you just got back, but I need you to join Harley and the CIA guards for added security. He's going to put out to sea while we try to track down the Olenskas."

"We have information that might help," Blitz said. "Along with some alarming news."

"Go on," Isabelle said.

"He's on a cargo ship that he's turned into a floating compound where he lives and works. It's called the *Imperiya*."

"Fitting," Isabelle said wryly. "That means Empire in Russian."

"He does have visions of grandeur and two missiles," Bree said.

"What?" Isabelle said, alarm on her face. "Who is the target?"

Bree shrugged. "We don't know."

Blitz said, "But we think Aleksei might."

"There's only one way to find out," Isabelle said, her eyes narrowing. "We'll go ask him."

Isabelle, Joker, Blitz, and Bree piled into a car, along with all their gear for this bodyguard duty, and headed to the docks.

Bree eyed the yacht, one of those beautiful luxury playthings for the rich and famous. With four levels of deck, six staterooms, large windows, tender garages for a speed boat and other watercraft, it was a floating home away from home.

They boarded after checking in with the CIA guy at the gangway. They found Aleksei, his sister and mom in the main sitting area. He rose and smiled broadly.

"It is good to see you. Thank you very much for getting my family out."

Bree nodded and walked over to Mila. She pulled the locket out of her pocket and handed it to the woman. Her face lit up and she rose and hugged

Bree.

“Oh, thank you. This means so much to me. I had no idea it was bugged.”

“We’re both glad you and your mom are safe. We’ll be staying onboard to ensure you stay that way.”

“Can we speak with you privately?” Isabelle said to Aleksei.

Mila and Polina rose. “We’ll leave you to your discussions,” Polina said as they exited to the outside deck.

“What is it?”

Blitz’s eyes narrowing, he said, “Did you know that Olenska has missiles?”

Aleksei looked away. “Yes, I was privy to all the information my dad received. I know that he used AAL to acquire them to keep himself off the radar.”

“Do you know who the target is for these missiles?”

“Yes,” he said tersely.

“Care to enlighten us?”

“If it had been US targets, I would have told you immediately, Isabelle.”

“What are the targets?” she demanded.

“The Kremlin and the KGB. He’s going to destroy the government and its thugs. I didn’t want to stop him. Both needed to be eradicated. I can’t say I’m any fan of his, but I can’t argue against what he wants to do. The only drawback is he’ll be in power, and nothing will have changed.”

“I have to alert them, Aleksei. You know I do,” Isabelle said solemnly.

He nodded. “That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

After that, Isabelle left and the yacht put out to sea.

* * *

JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT, Blitz woke up, the hair on the back of his neck bristling. He shook Bree awake and silently they got dressed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Something,” he responded.

They headed up on deck and he tripped over a body. He looked down to find one of the CIA guys down. He pulled his sidearm and started walking around to the main deck when he found another body. He stiffened, carefully coming around the corner. Harley was there, standing in front of the Volkovs,

her gun drawn.

“Z Militia are on board,” she mouthed.

Suddenly there was the sound of a chopper in the distance. They were being boarded and they were down three men. He held up his palm and walked to the swim platform. There were jet skis docked there. Three of them.

He ran back to the main cabin. “Get down below and get out of here on the speedboat. Bree and I will hold them off as best we can to give you a chance—”

“It’s too late,” Harley said. “I’ve already checked. They’ve disabled anything seaworthy. We’re trapped.”

“Then we fight and try to commandeer that chopper. Get on the radio and call for help.”

“I’ll go,” Bree said and headed for the stairs. But before she could make it to the bridge, she cried out.

Blitz ran around and saw her struggling with a man on the upper deck.

He was moving before the thought even hit him, hauling his ass up the stairs to get to Bree and the man who had her against the upper rail. Then there was a white-hot blast, the concussion threw him off the stairs, colliding with the railing and plunging into the ocean.

“*Blitz!*” Bree screamed, struggling. The explosion of light and pain drowned out everything and then there was nothing.

Nothing for a heartbeat.

Nothing for two.

He woke underwater and only his training saved him. Dazed, he held onto his breath, waiting to feel his body kick back into gear. This was his environment and in it he was a SEAL through and through. He regained his equilibrium and started for the surface. Bullets flowed into the water, the velocity slowed by the heavy liquid. He swam deeper, then did a U-turn back to the yacht, its hull white and shining from the light of the moon. He surfaced close to the boat and heard the screams—screams of rage from Bree and fear from the Volkovs. Aleksei and Harley were unconscious, slung over two of the thugs’ backs. His mom and sister were being shoved into the chopper.

One of Anya’s goons had grabbed Bree and was dragging her toward the helicopter. He tried to swim, but lost motor control, floating underwater, the world starting to spin, stars streaking across his line of vision, bringing pain,

the headache from hell.

He clawed at the hull, looking for a handhold, but it was too smooth. With agonizing effort, he used the flat of his hands to stabilize himself and pull himself back to the surface. He couldn't drown here or give up. What would happen to Bree, the rest of the people defending the Volkovs, and the Volkovs?

Bodies were strewn across the two decks. Bree fought like a wild cat, and she ducked several blows, but the guy was bigger than she was. He picked her up and tossed her hard against the window. She hit with a sickening thud and dropped like a stone—but in a move of supreme athletic grace, she landed on the balls of her feet, conscious and ready to go.

She wasn't giving up, not for a second. But he pleaded silently for her to surrender. There was no place for her in this, no safe place.

Her worried gaze went out into the ocean, searching for him, no doubt. Her mouth thinned out and her eyes flashed with pain and rage. She went at the guy, something gleaming in her hand, but he blocked her strike, backhanded her, then grabbed her around the neck.

This time she had no choice as he choked her out, threw her over his shoulder and headed for the chopper. Everyone else was already aboard.

Anya's goon ducked inside with Bree, and he wanted to howl. He had to watch helplessly as the chopper lifted off the deck and headed north out to sea. An agony of fear and rage washed over him. Forcing breath into his lungs, he made his way to the back of the yacht. They would disable it and he couldn't afford that. He had to stop them.

He pulled himself up, his strength returning. He'd lost his gun in the blast and fall, but he had his knife, and he had the will.

There was only win, *only* win, no other option, and he would win. Blitz moved in fast, holding the knife in a reverse edge grip, ready to do lethal damage. The first guy didn't last long, a slash across his throat as he was heading down to the engine room. On the bridge, he caught the last guy, hellbent on the radio. Something alerted the bastard, possibly Blitz's reflection in the windshield glass. He whirled, blocked Blitz's strike, and punched him in the face, scrambling for his sidearm, but Blitz was back up, sinking the knife into his gut and jerking it up, eviscerating the bastard. He fell.

He called for a pickup. His one and only thought was to get to Olenska before he lost the only woman he had ever loved.

BREE STUMBLED along the ship's corridor, barely making it over the metal frame part of the hatch before the blond man with a scarred face pulled her unceremoniously and without care for her balance. Her head ached from the blow to her temple, and her hip throbbed where she was pressed against the railing.

The chopper had landed on this huge cargo vessel—the *Imperiya*... She was now a hostage to Leonid Olenska and his sadistic daughter. They had exchanged words in the chopper, Anya shoving a gun in her face and threatening to blow her head off for killing her brother. But she hadn't. She'd withdrawn into herself, and Bree figured she'd received orders from her old man to keep her alive.

But the biggest source of her pain came from not knowing what happened to Blitz. He'd been thrown overboard from the grenade this asshole had lobbed down to the deck Blitz had been on. She struggled against his grip, but he shook her and continued to drag her carelessly downward into the ship. She climbed down a ladder and walked some more corridors. Trying to keep her bearings to escape, she counted doors, but her focus kept shifting and going fuzzy on her from the blow to her head.

Outside the door, Scarface stopped. He searched her, then ran his hands over her breasts, her waist and hips. She kned him in the nuts. He buckled. She glared down at him. There was no need to search her. They'd already taken her weapon and knife.

He straightened, and called her a bitch, then backhanded her across the face. She hit the wall and fell, her face exploding with burning pain.

“Asshole,” she muttered, rubbing her jaw. Her eyes watered. His smile made her uneasy as he grabbed her and pulled her off the floor.

“Now you die,” He opened the door and threw her inside. The door slammed shut. She looked around, still rubbing at her stinging cheek. It was a small cargo hold, one solitary bulb light that didn’t illuminate the corners filled with shadow, utterly empty and perfect for a jail cell. There wasn’t even a porthole to the outside.

She breathed deeply, fighting the chills rippling over her body from the icy cold. She’d been dressed for the Mediterranean and now she was somewhere in the North Sea located between the UK, Denmark, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. The sea was important for shipping lanes, a major fishery, and a rich source of wind and wave power. Just before they shoved her in the cargo hold, she could see land off the portside. Denmark maybe?

They would probably aid the US. Denmark was one of the original countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization formed in 1949 between the US, Canada, and several Western European nations to act as security against the then Soviet Union. But the *Imperiya* wasn’t a military ship and there was no evidence, except from Aleksei, that there were missiles on board. Also, they were security against Russia, but would they help to stop an attack on the Kremlin and the KGB?

Her brain hurt and she’d have to leave politics and diplomacy up to Isabelle. She sank down to the floor, battered, bruised and so heartsick. She was going to choose to believe that Blitz was unbreakable and had survived the blast and the ocean. She was going to choose to believe that even now, her friends and coworkers were preparing for the final showdown with the Olenskas.

She was going to choose to believe that they were coming for her, *he was coming for her*. Her mouth curved, and working her tongue over her lip, she tasted blood. He’d saved her life twice, three times would be the charm. They would get here in time, and she would walk off this ship alive.

She wasn’t going to lose him. A sudden ache constricted her throat, mixing with fear and faith. She closed her eyes. Of course she was, not to death, but to the circumstances of their lives. He was right. She was going back to DC, and he was going back to San Diego after his deployment. She’d been given a promotion to leadership over the Fly Team. Ready at a moment’s notice, like the SEALs, going where they were needed. There was

no way to make this work unless one of them compromised. That was a bitter pill to swallow. Her ambition was to go all the way to the top. How much would Bree be willing to sacrifice to get there? As much as her mom had sacrificed? She had her job at Micheal Kors, was financially well off, and worked all the time. She couldn't even make room for her own daughter. She was so closed off emotionally. Did Bree want to end up like that?

She shivered violently, the cold seeping into her bones, the painful revelations adding to knock her off-kilter. Dragging her mind back from those sobering thoughts, Bree had to shore up her courage. Experiencing a flutter of dread, she knew this wasn't even the beginning of what she would have to endure.

Her dread expanded. When Olenska dealt out his revenge, Bree was going to feel the full force of a ruthless, merciless beast. She could handle it. She *had* to handle it. All she had to do was survive until they came for her.

* * *

“BLITZ, WAIT!” Zorro called. The team's medic had been ministering to his cuts, all the way from the helicopter landing zone. The misery of acceptance started to sink in. They had Bree, his beautiful Bree. He had no doubt they were going to torture her, kill her if they hadn't already. *Hang on, babe. I'm coming for you.*

As they pulled up to the safehouse, Blitz bailed from the car just after the vehicle stopped moving, the needle and thread hanging from his arm. His insides wanted to lock up, but he refused to let it happen. Bree needed him. She needed them all and he'd be damned if he'd let her down.

Zorro cursing behind him, he followed Blitz into the safehouse. He stopped and Zorro caught up to him.

“Ready room?”

“Can you just let me—”

“Ready room!”

“This way,” Zorro said as he started down the hall, then stopped at a door. Blitz pushed it open. People were busy on computers, the chatter buzzing. “Have you located that ship!” Blitz bellowed into the room.

Joker came over to him and took in his appearance, the dangling needle, and pulled out a chair. “Sit down,” he ordered.

“I need to know—”

“And I’ll tell you as soon as you sit down, get a grip and let Zorro finish.” He looked over at Buck and said, “Get him some water.”

“I’m fine, LT. I need—”

“I know what you need. We’re going to get them back.” His teammates all nodded, staring at Blitz, then exchanged looks, each echoing the last with a nod, the fire of the brotherhood in their eyes. “Now sit the fuck down. That’s an order.”

Blitz complied, releasing a grateful breath. Taking the seat was the fastest way for him to get the information he needed to know. Zorro sat down next to him, grabbed the needle, swabbed the area again with antiseptic, a sharp medicinal scent, and wiped off the needle before he started stitching. Blitz felt nothing, not in his numbed arm or his stunned mind.

Buck handed him a bottle of water, the top already screwed off and Blitz drained it all the while taking in everything in the room. Isabelle was on the phone, Kat standing next to her. There was a satellite image up on a screen of open water. His teammates were huddled together at a table studying what looked like a schematic of a ship. His heart was about to burst with the pain of losing everyone aboard Volkov’s yacht. He closed his eyes as weariness rolled over him, aftereffects of adrenaline.

His throat tightened hard, and he swallowed before he said, “We’ll get her back.”

He wouldn’t sleep until she was safe, and his mind turned over the immediate possibilities.

Joker rested his backside against the table. “Isabelle is on the phone with the State Department. Kat is coordinating the search for the *Imperiya*. She believes it’s in the North Sea, close to Denmark. They have to navigate the channel into the Baltic Sea. We’re hoping the Danes will intercept the *Imperiya*.”

“And if they refuse?” Blitz asked.

“Then we’re assaulting. We always go in after diplomacy fails,” Buck said.

Blitz didn’t want to wait around for diplomacy or the Danes. Another bolt of fear lanced through him. What was Bree suffering? Aleksei, his family, Harley?

Buck reached out and gripped his shoulder. “She’s strong. She’ll survive. We’ll get them all back.”

Anya was a loose cannon, and she wanted Bree dead in revenge for her brother. Anya's old man didn't have a reputation for mercy. Those thoughts crippled him, and he was desperate for all his training to kick in and stay focused.

Hollywood stalked over, and in a low, gruff voice, said, "Isabelle is taking over the negotiations."

"Do the Russians know yet?"

"No. We're holding off. When they find out, they'll send MiGs and blow that ship out of the water."

"The Danes?"

"They're waffling. They want proof we don't have. Volkov gave us the evidence we needed to put the Olenskas and Achebe away but said nothing about the missiles. He doesn't care about what happens to the government." He looked at all the SEALs' faces. "We go packed and ready for anything." He looked at his watch. "We're not waiting for answers from people who don't have skin in this game. You're deploying now. North Sea. The Globemaster is fueled and waiting. By the time you get there, it will be dark." Blitz rose, ready to get his commando on with his brothers and show Olenska exactly what he was up against.

"Just us, sir?" Joker asked.

"No, Bravo team has already been deployed, Lieutenant Crowman and his people are already in the air. They have the schematics and are being briefed en route." He gave them the coordinates to rendezvous with the other part of this task unit. Two Lieutenants, fourteen enlisted.

Hollywood met each of his teammates' eyes. "You board that ship, you save our people, and you neutralize the missile threat. That's the mission."

"Hoo-yah!" they all said in unison.

* * *

ALEKSEI STARED at the corner where his mom, sister, and Harley huddled. The low light barely reached them; they were more shadow than substance. They must have been here for hours. Bound by hand and foot, terror on his mom and sister's faces, determination on Harley's, Aleksei experienced the deepest, most painful guilt he could imagine. This was all his fault. He shouldn't have kept anything back. He should have told Isabelle about

Imperiya and Olenska's wild and destructive plan to end Russia's government by blowing up the Kremlin and the KBG. At least the current government wasn't as reckless as Olenska, mad with his wealth and his power, believing he could rule Russia better than they could. Aleksei should have realized that it was a precursor to World War III. His regret cut him deep, knowing that he'd dragged his family and Harley into his own disillusionment and misery. He should be the one to pay the consequences, not them.

Along with the guilt was the kind of terror for his family and the woman he...loved. Oh, damn. He was just realizing this now when it was the end of the line for him, her, and any happiness they could have carved out of this hell.

It was freezing in this empty cargo space where he was painfully bound to a chair by his wrists and ankles. He had no doubt they would all die here, and it was his fault.

The door opened and Leonid strode in with Anya on his heels. She looked different from when she'd assaulted his yacht. Her dark hair was loose and falling over one shoulder. Her dark blue slacks and turtleneck belonged at a ski lodge in the Alps. A Dr. Jekyll to her Ms. Hyde he'd met in the chopper. He'd accepted her threats as truth. He couldn't imagine what was worse than murder.

Leonid stood by the entrance as she walked up to Aleksei, tried for grace and failed, her moves too rigid, methodical. She completely ignored his family and Harley like they didn't exist. He had a feeling she was going to act as bad cop and there wasn't going to be any good cop.

"Aleksei," she said in greeting. "I hope our hospitality is up to your exacting standards."

"You wouldn't know or understand hospitality if it bit you on the ass." He noticed how her hand caressed the long knife sheathed at her hip. Her face hardened, her eyes narrowing. "What do you want from me, Anya?" His gaze flicked to Leonid.

Her gaze sharpened on him. She didn't like him using her given name. "Right to the point, no messing around. All right. We want to know what you told the Americans."

"Everything my father knew, I knew, and I gave them all the evidence they need to fry both of you."

"You never understood what we stood for."

“What you stood for? You *murdered* an American ambassador in cold blood, broke the rules of diplomacy, and crossed a line that should have never been crossed.”

She shrugged. “It had to be crossed. He was a threat.”

“Were *his children* a threat! You *murdered* children and their mother! Was that part of your *barbaric* message? You might want to change the world, but no one is ever going to let you take a pass over their deaths! You saw their tenacity and relentless pursuit of Bin Laden. For ten years! The Americans will never stop hunting you.”

She stared at him, arching a thin brow. “We have our plans for the Americans. They will not ever pose a threat to Russia again.”

Something inside him went still as glass, and his gut turned over. “You’re both mad if you think you can poke that bear and not suffer the repercussions of them and their allies. How do you think you’re going to feed the people of Russia, or what happens when the oil runs out? They will attack you in ways that will decimate Russia. You and your father will have accomplished nothing except World War III and the second fall.”

She stepped closer, dismissing everything he said. She wasn’t affected, so smug and confident in her delusions of grandeur. “What else did you tell them?”

Giving the Olenskas even a shred of information regarding the missiles was dangerous. They would be forewarned. He didn’t doubt the capability of the SEALs or the FBI, or Isabelle.

“That was it. Just the information about your hand in the deaths of the Ogdens.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. He’d only been forced to confess to his duplicity. He hadn’t actually told Isabelle anything.

She walked the small circumference around his chair, and his neck prickled when she stopped behind him. He could smell her cloying perfume and she wouldn’t be at all tolerant of him stalling. He jerked when her cold fingers touched the back of his neck, then the chilling tip of the blade.

“One little push and I sever your brain cord.”

“Anya,” her name reverberated in the cold, empty room as empty as that bitch’s heart.

The knife disappeared and she walked back in front of him. “I will kill everyone you love, Aleksei.” For the first time, her hollow eyes turned toward his family and Harley.

“I’m telling you I didn’t say anything, but in my blind bitterness, I

thought only of the current government toppling. I didn't want to think of the consequences of what would happen if you and your sadistic father took control, but I didn't expect that to really happen." He hoped his bluff would work. Sacrificing anyone he loved was unthinkable.

She slapped him viciously. The sting exploded through his cheek and made his eyes water. He turned his head and met her gaze. He'd sworn his allegiance to the Americans. He considered himself an American now. Part of the people who had forged a nation in democracy, not without their own shedding of their blood. He would not betray them again.

She let out a breath that didn't seem to calm the rage in her eyes. She stared, her fists white-knuckled, then suddenly she was inches from him.

And for the first time, she smiled.

Fear gripped his spine. The door opened and a man wheeled in a cloth-covered tray. When it reached her, she flipped back the cloth. The tray was neatly arranged with implements like a dentist used.

She picked up a syringe filled with a pale-yellow liquid—sodium pentothal. The truth serum.

* * *

HOURS HAD PASSED and the cold made her stiff. She moved around to keep herself warm.

The door rattled, her heart suddenly jammed against her ribs, hammering frantically as fear churned through her. Fortifying herself with a deep breath, she shifted and braced herself, ready and waiting to face whoever came through the door.

She gasped softly as Anya walked through. She had expected her father. Was she here with his permission?

"So, we meet formally for the first time," Anya said, inspecting her while Bree waited for the cold bitch to make her move. They were alone in here, and Bree was unbound, without a weapon, and Anya carried that sheathed knife.

"Where are the others? What have you done with them?" Bree wasn't in the mood to trade niceties with the woman responsible for murdering her ambassador and his family.

"Aleksei is contemplating his answers with the help of a little drug."

Oh, God. It reeked so much of old-world spy stuff, Bree felt surreal. *Vee has vays of making you talk*, filtered through her head and if she wasn't so heavily in deep trouble, she could almost laugh. But that wasn't an idle threat. They were going to make him talk. Not sure of what he had said, she tightened her lips. If the bitch came here for information, she was going to be severely disappointed. They were going to kill her anyway. All of them. There was no mercy from these people.

Her heavily accented English was textbook and monotone. Bree hoped her Russian was better than that.

"And your lover is at the bottom of the ocean, floating the currents, his dead, fixed eyes open and staring at nothing. I lost my brother, and you lost your man."

Bree reeled. She couldn't help herself. She lunged forward and punched Anya, knocking her head to the side, then sent a fist into her nose. She went backward, stumbling and landing flat on her ass on the hard metal. The shock on Anya's face was comical and all Bree's bag work in the gym and her workouts weren't for nothing. Her muscles packed a whoop-ass can of beat down.

Anya screamed, her voice echoing off the walls. Then Anya rushed her, throwing her body at Bree. They tumbled to the floor. Anya straddled her chest, leaning over to grip Bree's hair and yank her head back. She put the blade to Bree's throat.

"Anya!" her father's voice boomed out and she froze. Footsteps reverberated and she turned her head slightly to see his boots come to a stop above them. His hand materialized. "You can give such an enemy a fair fight, my daughter."

Anya's face contorted into fury, but she heeded her father and slapped the handle of the knife into his palm.

Bree wasn't being passive through this, but pinned by the woman's knees, she was trapped. Then she felt her ankle, her foot, and Bree grabbed onto both, throwing her legs up and propelling herself forward. The motion sent Anya backward and Bree clamped her legs around Anya's middle.

She squeezed, put in all her strength from countless squats. Bree never missed leg day. She pressed harder and heard Anya's breath labor. Harder still and Bree felt rib bones give under the pressure. One cracked then another and Anya screamed, pushed at her legs.

More men entered the room, but Bree never let her go. Anya gasped for

air, and Bree pressed until she had none left in her lungs and the woman faded into unconsciousness. Bree released her, kicking her away and jumping to her feet. She wasn't done. Anya regained consciousness in moments, and with both hands, Bree grabbed the woman by the shirt and dragged her to her feet. She could barely stand upright.

"Go to hell, Anya," she said. With those words, she landed two sharp, quick jabs to her face. Cartilage folded and blood poured.

Anya's eyes rolled, legs softening, and Bree released her. She fell, her head bouncing on the metal floor.

"It seems you are a match for both my daughter and my son," Leonid said as he pushed off the back wall. Three men were standing next to him, their fists clenching and unclenching. They'd had to watch as she kicked Anya's ass.

"Too damn bad."

He gestured with his head and one of the men approached, but his focus was on Anya. "Get her to sick bay." He stared at her for a moment and for the first time she realized there was a coil of nylon rope in his hands.

She backed up a step and he said, "Hold her down."

The two men came at her, and Bree drew on her courage, her training, and her desire to survive. She ducked one and punched the other. He reeled away and she whirled and kicked the other guy in the stomach and when he bent over, she kned him in the face. He fell to the deck and didn't move.

"Get more men."

Moments later, with five more opponents, she was immobilized. One grabbed her by the hair and the shoulder, digging his thumb into her collarbone and forcing her down to the frigid deck on her stomach.

He didn't let up. "Cowards," she muttered. The man dug his thumb in harder and she gasped, curling away from the pain.

All her limbs were tightly held in the four men's grasps and the fifth mashed her cheek and head against the floor with a sadistic grin. Only then Leonid did walk to her, his eyes gleaming. He crouched down. "You killed my son. For that I want you to suffer for a long time before you die."

He unfurled the cord, and she could see that it was nylon. "Her arms." They were jerked behind her back and Leonid looped the cord around and started tying knots. They tightened painfully. He then looped in her ankles, and finally her throat.

Over time, your muscles will give out and you'll lose your position, if

you don't suffocate first. Then you'll slowly die.

Any movement and she'd choke herself to death. Where did they learn this shit? The cold made her bones ache, and she could barely breathe.

Then the men left her there. Bree arched her back, trying to reach the nylon cord securing her ankles. If she could loosen it... Her fingers touched it, and she shifted her hands a little at a time, stretching the cord and trying to move her fingers enough. The rope cut off her circulation. She could feel her palms swelling. She arched a bit more, heard her vertebrae pop as she shaped the knots, finding the end and tracing it, imagining it in her mind.

She worked at the ties slowly to pull against the cords, holding her breath as the cord around her throat tightened. Nylon was strong, but it had give. She kept the door in her line of vision. If Leonid caught her, he'd just push her head down and watch as she strangled herself to death.

BLITZ and the two teams were airborne, falling to the Baltic Sea rapidly, the Globemaster winging away. He was relieved to finally be here. After two hours of flight time, they were finally over the target.

They had been inserted two miles out. All sixteen of them, plus two Zodiacs, Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats or RHIBs with a planned HALO jump, were free falling to earth at about two hundred miles per hour for almost a full two minutes.

Below them were the lights of Denmark, casting a faint glow against the sky, outlining the looming black escarpment that formed the southern tip of land. The Danes had refused to get involved with the cargo ship without proof. They stated they would support the Americans in their pursuit and gave them valuable information about the ship moving through their channel.

If they were able to save their people on that ship, the credit would go to Hollywood. He anticipated the Dane's reaction and got them airborne while the back-and-forth diplomacy was still playing out.

Blitz looked over to see Bear and Flint falling in tandem like the pros they were.

Barracuda, the other team's MWD, a gray sable Malinois, was clipped to Viper, his handler as well. The rest of the members, Crow, Baltimore, Shotgun, Fate, Harvard, Midnight, and 360 were already floating toward their own Zodiac as were the rest of Blitz's team. As soon as he reached the correct altitude, his chute opened. The boat below them descended to the water tethered to its own chutes, hit the water with a soft splash.

Blitz had jumped with his fins and dry suit on as had all of them. Once

he'd hit the water, he released his chute and swam for the boat. Joker was already aboard when Blitz reached it, helping to haul him over the rubber lip. Then it was like clockwork as the rest of the team flowed into the RHIB.

As soon as Crow's team was situated, they started up the boats and sped toward their target, the *Imperiya*. After about ten minutes the *Imperiya* came into view, a freshly coated cargo ship with a crane towering on the deck, approximately three hundred and fifty feet in length. Gray hull with a matching gray stack and a white bridge. To anyone traversing this busy shipping lane, it would have appeared to be an innocuous cargo ship going about its business of delivering goods.

The plan was that Crow's team would assault from the starboard side and Joker's team would assault from the port side. They got into position. As the assault team's lead climber, Blitz was responsible for being the first SEAL to ascend a telescoping pole with ladder attached to get onto the deck of the ship. He maneuvered the equipment, then latched onto the hull, making sure it was secure, he slung his M-4 over his shoulder, tying down the muzzle so it wouldn't clank against the side of the ship and give them away.

When he reached the deck, he peeked over the edge. There were three guards, one was going toward a set of stairs, another was looking out to sea, but not toward Blitz, and the third was way too close for comfort.

The bridge sparkled like a crown atop the five-story white superstructure adjacent to the ship's stern. Rising about twelve feet above it was a tall white communications tower, radar tracker, and emergency beacon. Below the bridge was a glass-enclosed ceiling that looked like it was the top of Olenska's living space and the panels would separate to fully open to the sky.

Farther down from the inattentive guard was the entrance. Most likely they would find the elder Olenska inside.

He ducked back down. "I'm going to need to clear the way," Blitz said.

"Crow?"

"We're ready. 360 is at the deck. One guard on this side."

"Three here," Blitz said.

"On my mark," Joker said. "Execute."

Blitz pulled himself over the rail using his upper body strength until he was able to set his felt boot on the edge of the deck to propel himself over. The stairs guard was out of sight, the other guard still looking out to sea. He shouldn't have been daydreaming.

Without making a sound, he came up behind the closest guard and

covered his mouth, slit his throat, and lowered him down to the deck. Then moving quickly and silently, he caught the inattentive guard, and he went the way of the first.

“Deck is clear,” Blitz said. He crouched down behind some boxes and spied a hatch that led to the bowels of the ship. During the two-hour flight, he had memorized the layout and knew where every cabin and cargo hold was located.

That was his and Buck’s target. They were going in search of the hostages and tangos below decks along with Gator, Bear, and Flint from his team, and Midnight, Harvard, Viper, and Barracuda from Crow’s team. Professor and Baltimore would provide overwatch and Joker would oversee the op.

Crow, Fate, and 360 were tasked with taking the bridge. Shotgun would join D-Day and Zorro to take down Leonid Olenska.

As soon as the team was assembled up top, Blitz, Buck, Bear, and Flint headed for the entrance to the lower decks. Buck opened the hatch and Blitz slipped through, moving quickly down the corridor. He and Buck continued down a ladder to the next deck, clearing as they went. Most of the crew were in their beds and it was a simple matter of flex cuffing them and stuffing socks in their mouths.

His mind had been focused like a laser on the mission, but in the back of his mind, he was frantic to find Bree, to make sure she was all right. The thought of her already dead made him crazy. He had to find her.

“Speed it up,” Joker said through comms. Russian MiGs are on their way. We need to get off this ship!”

That fueled him and he, Buck, and Bear moved faster.

“Jackpot,” Zorro said through the comms. Olenska isn’t—”

There was the sound of a terrible explosion, and the ship rocked with it.

“Zorro,” Joker screamed through the comms.

There was nothing but silent static as he, Buck, and Bear stopped moving, Blitz’s gut in a terrible twisted knot.

Then there was coughing. “We’re okay,” Shotgun said. “Zorro’s out, but D-Day and I are fine.” He coughed some more. “Olenska escaped after he detonated.”

* * *

BREE WAS ALMOST FREE, her exertions causing sweat to roll off her. Her back was killing her, but the noose around her neck had loosened considerably. One more knot and she'd be—the nylon ropes slid through her fingers, slackening around her wrists and ankles. She stretched out, taking a moment to relieve the terrible cramping and spasms along her muscles with a soft groan of relief. It was a good thing she was so fit. If she hadn't been, she would have choked herself to death by now. She sat up and stretched some more, then attempted to stand. She had no idea how long she'd been tied, but it seemed interminable. She snatched up the rope and crept to the door, stepping carefully so she didn't make a sound. She tried the handle. It was locked.

She took up a position behind the door. The first guy through had to have a weapon. Once she choked him out, she would be free.

* * *

ALEKSEI WAS TRYING with all his might to keep from losing his train of thought, but the drug was working its magic. Anya was back but looking like she'd been in a terrible fight and lost. That gave him satisfaction. A lot of satisfaction.

He tried to focus on her battered face. It made his head hurt, and images flashed. Images he knew weren't really there. She kept turning into a demon—red, malevolent eyes, distorted, grotesque features.

Suddenly, his mom was there held tightly by two beefy guards. Anya lifted her weapon and pressed it against her forehead. "Tell me what I want to know, or she'll die."

"No," he whispered. "I told them. I told them everything. They know." His voice broke. "Please, don't kill my mother. Please," he pleaded.

"You were all dead as soon as you stepped onto the *Imperiya*."

His mother wailed softly, and he met her eyes, pleading for her forgiveness. She stared back at him, her eyes full of tenderness.

"No," he sobbed, cheeks flooded with tears he couldn't control.

The door opened and Anya growled. "I told you I would—" Her words were cut off as three shots echoed in the room. Anya and the two men dropped like puppets whose strings had been cut.

His mom crawled over the bodies and rose to slip her arms around his

head. “We are saved,” she whispered in Russian, her sobs and tears mingling with his.

His hands flopped free, his ankles next. He blinked several times as Gator helped his mom up and released her bonds. In the corner, more men were releasing Harley and his sister. Men he didn’t recognize, but it was clear they were with Gator.

Harley rushed across the floor and sent her arms around him. He wasn’t sure if he was dreaming, or Anya had actually killed him and he was in heaven.

“He stinks of garlic...oh, man, sodium pentothal,” one of the men said. He looked into his eyes, flashing a light, and then said, “Looks like he’s coming out of it.”

“Thank you...”

“Midnight. You’re going to be all right.”

He heard Gator say, “LT, we have the Volkovs and Harley. Volkov is drugged with sodium pentothal, but the ladies are all fine. No injuries. Anya Olenska is dead.”

Finally, his arms worked, and he pulled Harley onto his lap, his chest filling up with the kinds of emotions he couldn’t even define. And his vision blurred again. God, but he loved her.

His hand not quite steady, he cupped the back of her neck, the ache in his throat so intense it made his jaws ache. His eyes opened and he stared at her. She stroked his cheek.

“You scared the hell out of me, Aleksei,” she said, her voice soft.

She wrapped her arms around him with desperate strength. Closing his eyes, Aleksei roughly turned his face against her neck, locking his arms around her, an agony of relief rushing through him. She released a soft sob as he stroked her face. “I love you, Harley. And I want you in my life no matter what.”

Tears running down her cheeks, she tightened her hold, pressing her face against his. “Oh, Aleksei. Only you can say that right after we were almost all killed. Only you.”

He covered her mouth with a slow, searching kiss. Her breath caught and she tightened her hold, meshing with him. This was real, and they were alive. Everything else could be worked out later.

* * *

AFTER THE GOOD news about Zorro, Shotgun, and D-Day, Blitz turned to Bear. He pulled out a T-shirt and let the dog sniff it. "Let him loose. See if he has any luck."

Bear said, "Seek," in German and Flint took off. They ran after him. Finally, the dog stopped and sat down. Blitz looked around the corner and saw two guards and an open door. They were shouting. He nodded to Bear, and they took them out. He approached the door, and they ducked inside.

A figure was against the wall, and in her hands was a gun pointed at them. Dead at her feet, his eyes open and staring was Olenska, a cord wrapped around his throat.

"Bree," Bear bellowed, holding up his hand. "It's us. Stop!"

She made a soft gasp of horror. "Oh, my God. I didn't know it was you." She dropped to her knees.

He touched her face, pushed aside her hair, and with his thumb, swiped at bits of blood. Her skin was cold, her pulse rapid. "Babe," he said hoarsely.

"You came for me. I knew you'd come for me." She leaned in and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly. He groaned and pulled back, pressing his forehead to hers. "Bree, I—"

"We don't have time, Blitz. Man, we gotta go. The MiGs." He then said, "LT, we have Bree. She's safe and unharmed." He glanced over at her and continued, "For the most part."

Joker's voice came over the comms. "The Chinook is almost here. Haul your asses up here, now. You have ten minutes, maybe less."

Blitz picked her up and they started running full out, making faster time than when they came in. They couldn't worry about the trapped crew and Z Militia. They had sealed their own fate when they'd signed on with Olenska.

They rushed through the hatch, the big chopper, its twin rotors still running, sitting on the big helipad at the stern of the ship, the British flag displayed on the side. Ah, a little help from their friends.

Quickening their pace, Blitz could hear the sonic boom of one of the jets. They reached the waiting chopper, his legs pumping, and jumped inside, Bear and Flint right behind him. The doors were closed by the crew waiting for them to get inside.

"Go, go, go," Joker said, and the big bird took off, hauling ass away from the *Imperiya*. The scream of jets filled the air, and Blitz watched as a missile hit the *Imperiya*, an explosion ripping through the ship, tearing at its belly. Then two secondary explosions sent a second, small concussive wave as the

missiles inside the hold blew.

Orange fire blazed into the night sky, white smoke turning black and sooty before the second MiG dropped its payload, decimating whatever was left of the cargo ship, thick metal peeled back and tattered.

Bree looked out the window realizing it was over. She'd completed her mission. The people who were responsible for the Ogden murders, although not exactly brought to justice, had received a fitting end. Perishing in their pride and arrogance on a ship they called Empire.

Blitz turned and met her gaze. Her body still racked with shivers, she reveled in his heat. Midnight slipped a blanket over her shoulders and she eyed Zorro who was hooked up to an IV, his face sooty, his eyes closed. He looked worse for wear, and she bit her lip.

Midnight gave her a thumbs up and nodded with a smile.

She breathed a sigh of relief. He was going to be okay. They had all gotten through this.

Isabelle and Kat would be so pleased, so would Gavin and the State Department. They hadn't only completed their mission, but they had thwarted a serious threat to world security. The Kremlin and KGB were still standing, and for better or worse, they were the rational enemy they understood.

She fingered the rope she'd snatched from the floor. It was a reminder that she could overcome anything and she didn't need a job—this job—to make her important.

Blitz's warm fingers snagged her chin, turning her face to his. "Third time's a charm," she said so he could hear her above the engines. Noisy as hell modes of transportation.

His beautiful mouth curved up in a smile. "As in three times I saved your life."

She nodded.

"I'd like to stop at three if you don't mind," he whispered before he covered her mouth with his.

Oh, she would have missed this, she thought, drinking him in, hungry for the feel of his skin on hers. She met his gaze. "That was crazy." Tears burned her eyes. Her lip quivered.

"Don't start that. You wouldn't want me to break down in front of the guys."

"Right. SEALs don't do mushy," she stammered, chills wracking her.

He scoffed. "Nope, not big, bad frogmen." He pulled another thermal

blanket over her. His hands were shaking a little.

“I thought I had lost you back there on the yacht.” She gripped his hand. “That went rather wrong.”

“Once again, big, bad frogman.”

“That’s why I knew you wouldn’t drown. You had to come to save me.”

His features tightened, and she saw what it meant to him in his piercing green eyes.

He kissed the top of her head, wrapping his arms around her for more heat, so comfortable in his lap. He murmured, “You sure have a lot of faith in me, babe.”

She buried her face in his neck. “I’m here with you. So, the proof is in the pudding.”

His shoulders worked with a deep chuckle, and he looked deeply in her eyes. “Your new nickname is pudding.”

“No,” she said vehemently, but secretly, she would let him call her anything he pleased. His big hands swallowed hers, warming them even more. And for the ride to safety, he never let her go.

* * *

BREE OPENED her eyes and saw soft light spilling over Blitz. He was slumped in a chair beside the bed, his hand on the bedcovers. The Brits had insisted that she go to the hospital and get checked over. Zorro was heading there anyway.

Outside the window, she could hear an ambulance sound its siren in the busy streets of London.

She shifted to her side and simply watched him sleep. He wore his uniform, still in his tack vest. Her gaze traveled over the swarthy skin any woman would envy and the sexy stubble dusting his jaw.

Her gaze traveled down his body, remembering every muscle, his big hands and the familiar feel of them on her skin, yet it wasn’t just her body that recognized him, it was her soul.

As if sensing her, he opened his eyes. The smoky darkness sent a dagger of something delicious through her.

Her bedside phone rang, and he reached for it. Set it to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Bree! It’s so good to hear your voice,” Gavin said. It was as if he’d thrown cold water on her and she was freezing all over again, reality intruding. “Bravo, my friend. You have accomplished your task and then some. We’re all proud of you here.”

“How are Greg and the guys?”

“Mending well and getting antsy. The guys are all jealous they weren’t there to help out.” He chuckled. “You can see for yourself when you get back to DC. The bureau booked you a flight heading out of Heathrow at eleven p.m. tonight. Come see me when you land. We have a lot to discuss.”

God, that hurt, and the pain rushed through her with blinding force, crushing her chest.

“By the look on your face, I’d say you’re heading home.”

She told him about the flight. He looked crestfallen as he sat on the bed. She could hear him swallow hard. “We’re heading out tonight, too, but on the Globemaster.”

“Back to San Diego.”

He nodded, and she sighed. “I can’t believe the embassy has been closed and Niger now joins Mali and Burkina Faso under Junta rule. I feel bad for those people who are caught in that never-ending cycle of poverty and terrorism. My heart breaks for them.”

“At least AAL is broken with Achebe dead. Who knows if they’ll reform.” He took her hands in his, looking as if he wanted to say so much more. “I heard from Gator that Anya was pretty badly beaten, her nose broken. You?”

She pointed at herself and nodded. “Me. She deserved an ass-kicking, and I don’t work the bags and pump iron for nothing. I knocked her out. Leonid Olenska tied me up into a position that he hoped would choke me to death. Instead, I got out of it and he was the one who died by those cords and my hand. He got what he deserved.”

“Hmm, I’m going to have to rethink that pudding nickname.”

She laughed softly.

Joker stuck his head in. “Zorro’s being released. We’re heading out.”

He nodded and they stared at each other for a moment. She could see the awful tension in him. Her vision blurring with the enormity of her feelings, Bree said his name. His head came up and she got a good look at his face. Seeing the agony in his eyes, she simply reacted.

Her voice catching on a sob, she said his name again, then grabbed him,

his agony hers.

Blitz crushed her in a hard, fierce embrace, his hand roughly tangling in her loose hair.

She could barely breathe with the stunning rush of wanting. So much raw emotion arched between them. She didn't think she could bear to let him go.

His heart beating in tandem with hers, he brushed his mouth across hers, and raw desire surged for this man in everything he was, his mind, body, and soul.

She met his mouth, opening, needing the heat of him. Blitz shuddered, his mouth against hers as he crushed her even tighter.

His breathing raw and labored, Blitz ripped his mouth away, holding her face between his palms, expelling his breath in a violent shudder. She knew in her heart that he had never intended this to happen. But she also knew this was his final goodbye. And it nearly killed her.

“So long, Bree. Shoot me a text every once in a while and let me know what's happening with you.”

She touched his face, her fingers lingering over his skin, edging his strong jaw, slipping over his mouth. Emotion after emotion piled up in her. It was as if they were fused together by desperation, by their individual sorrow, by all the things they couldn't say, and it was too much. Far too much. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

“Goodbye, Callen.” She wasn't sure she could interact with him. The pain would be too much. She loved him, and she had to let him go.

He smiled at her. “See you around, SEAL babe.”

Then he was gone, and it was as if her world had collapsed.

* * *

NINE HOURS LATER, Bree was sitting in Gavin's office. She'd slept on her flight, but fitfully, trying to reconcile her love for Blitz and her FBI career. Trying to put everything into some kind of perspective.

“So, you've got your pick of assignments. You're taking the next step.”

“I'd be administrative from now on. No field work?”

“That's right. More pay, less danger. It's only a matter of time before you're sitting in my chair.”

His chair with a collection of photos on her desk of the family she barely

knew, couldn't make time for. For what? A job, ambition, and a child's need to understand her mother's detachment and her father's death. Why hadn't she seen it before? Her choices would always be her own.

"Bree?"

She raised her head and looked at her boss.

"You were a million miles away. You all right?"

She saw the pictures on his desk of his grown children, the absence of his wife who had divorced him last year after twenty-five years of marriage. "Was it worth it, Gavin?" she asked, gesturing to the photos.

He looked at them, his face showing the awful sense of loss in his stark expression. "Honestly?"

"Yes, please."

"I answered the call whether it was in the middle of the night or to third-world nations on extended missions. I worked long days and weekends for nearly twenty-four years. That not only took a toll on me, but it was devastating to my family. But I spun it in my head that I was a dedicated hard-working agent. I believed I was setting an example, being the kind of role model and father, my children could be proud of. Duty to country, respect for the rule of law, and protecting the weak from those who prey on them are all good qualities to emulate.

"But in truth my sudden departures, extended stays away...my absence eroded my relationships. They stopped expecting me to be there for them. My passion for the job kept me from seeing that my FBI family had, almost, replaced my own." He leaned back, his eyes full of sadness and some regret. "Was it worth it? No. I lost Jill, and she won't listen to any pleas for reconciliation. My children barely speak to me. I haven't seen them since they each graduated from college." He leaned forward onto his desk. "Why are you asking me about this?"

His words struck her so hard, making her realize that she had been on that path...emulating her mom because that was all Bree knew. Now, after Callen, there was no turning away from him. "I fell in love with Callen Berenger. He's one of the SEALs on the team I worked with. I can barely breathe at the thought of living my life without him in it. I think he's in love with me, too."

"So, fuck the FBI?"

She lifted her head and smiled at him. "No, not exactly. But I know I don't want to be behind a desk or on the Fly Team. I want to be out there, in the field, making a difference. It's why I signed up for the FBI." For the first

time in hours, she felt the weight on her heart disappear. “What do you have in San Diego?”

He smiled at her. “I think I have just the job for you.”

* * *

BLITZ STOOD in front of the refrigerator in his boxers, his robe open, staring inside the damn thing as if inspiration would hit him. He’d been home for two weeks, and there hadn’t been one word from Bree. He clenched his jaw, maybe that was for the best.

Fuck that. No, it wasn’t. He thought he had everything sorted out when he got back from London, but he had just been lying to himself. He loved Bree and she was one of a kind.

The *one* for him.

She had changed everything, and it made him realize he’d been playing big-time games with himself. He could resign from the Navy since his enlistment was up next year. They could be together. He was sure he could get something lucrative in DC.

All he knew for sure was that his love for Bree had been real. So damned real. *A sure fucking bet.* Exhaling heavily, Blitz dragged his hand down his face. He’d been rigid with his father, never really easing him into the idea of him not pursuing the NFL. That rigidity had spilled over into his life. Maybe now, he could understand his father’s bitter disappointment. Maybe they could have a civil discussion without Blitz flying off the handle and butting heads with his dad, instead of listening to him. They could be a family again.

Rules could change.

His phone rang and he closed the fridge in disgust. Maybe he would get dressed and go out for breakfast.

“Hello?”

“Blitz? It’s Bree.”

“Babe! I was just thinking about you.”

She sounded so close. He wished she was here. “Ooh, I hope it was good.”

“It was enlightening.”

“Oh, that sounds intriguing. Tell me more.”

“I was thinking that we’re so good together and I’m not having an easy

time without you in my life. So, my enlistment is up next year. How about I find something in DC? We could do the long-distance thing until I'm finished with the Navy."

"Do you really want to quit the Navy?" she said softly.

He wanted to be honest with her. "No, not if I had a choice, but if it means being without you, I'll adjust."

"I don't think so."

"Bree—"

"Let's revisit that in a moment. I called to ask you a question."

His doorbell rang and he started for the front of the house, sandwiching the phone between his ear and shoulder while he belted his robe.

"Okay, shoot."

He opened the door, and she was standing on his threshold. She removed the phone from her ear, ending the call. "Do you know someone who could give me surf lessons? How about a beach that's got the most gnarly waves?" She raised her hand and gestured toward the street with her thumb. "I have this new surfboard and no clue how to use it."

He looked over her shoulder to see that she had a shiny new Jeep, her pretty flowered brand-new surfboard decorating the rack on top.

He stood there for a moment, frozen in place. His heart stopped beating, then started up. "That's two questions."

"Oh, good, you can do math. I didn't blow your mind." She tucked her phone in her pocket, then took his phone out of his hand, crowding him into his house. She placed his phone on the side table and kicked the door closed with her heel. She looked back and forth. "Bedroom?"

"Ocean "Blue" Beckett, a brother SEAL can teach anyone to surf, and La Jolla Shores is the number one spot to learn surfing in San Diego. The waves are consistent and of good quality, which is the best situation for beginners. The Shores are protected from the southwest trade winds, which means that strong winds won't blow off the waves." He took a hard breath. "Down the hall to the right. First door on the left."

Her heart felt so full, and she started to crowd him again. Her arms slipped around his neck as he walked backward, enthralled with just staring at her, unable to believe she was really here.

She ushered him into his room, and she looked around. "Nice. I like the rumpled sheets, but for some reason, I suspected you would make your bed. Crisp hospital corners and tight sheets that you could bounce a quarter off

of.” She unbelted his robe, ran her hands up his bare torso, over his pecs, and down again to the waistband of his boxer briefs. She circled the waistband and slipped her hands beneath the cotton, cupping his butt and squeezing. He gasped, his dick hardening.

“Oh, hello, fine ass,” she whispered. She dragged his hips toward hers, but he resisted.

“Wait. You took a job in San Diego?”

“Mhum,” she said, leaning forward and kissing his jaw, trailing her mouth down his throat.

“What job?”

“I’m the new FBI liaison to the NCIS Office of Special Operations.” She grinned. “Isn’t that fantastic? I can do my own fieldwork and partner with NCIS when they need me, where I can use my counterterrorism experience. It’s the best of both worlds.”

He lifted his brow, needing more answers, which he fully deserved. “You moved here, for me?” His heart pounded so hard his chest hurt. Despite every attempt he’d made to keep his emotions out of the equation, he’d gone and let her inside his heart. His own story was right there in her eyes for him to see—the way he felt about her, along with the fact that he’d given her a piece of himself that would forever be hers. Not just his body or his heart, but his soul.

“Nope, I moved here for me. I was lucky you were here.” She giggled, kissing his chest, then rasped her tongue over his nipple, sucking the hard nub into her mouth. She pushed down his boxers, running her hands all over him. “I don’t want to sit behind a desk for the next twenty years and regret that I never told you I love you. I want to be your one and only, even if the SEALs come first.”

He grabbed her hands, stilling her seduction, sucking in a sharp breath as the words penetrated. “I’ll point out here that you were wrong. You are my world. I’d have left for you.”

“I’m not going to ask that of you when we both can get what we want. We’ll work it out.” Her eyes widened, and she whispered, “Does that mean —”

“That I fucking love you? Fucking yes.”

A little cry escaped her, and she cradled his face in her hands and kissed him.

“More than I can put into words.”

Her eyes teared up overflowing onto her cheeks. “So, it wasn’t just the great sex?”

He grinned. “Could have been part of it,” he said, waggling his brows, looking down at his dick. “The proof is in the pudding.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Want to make sure?” she asked, maneuvering him over to the bed, the back of his knees touching the mattress.

She pushed him back, slipping quickly out of her clothes as he watched, then she straddled him.

“I thought you wanted to learn how to surf?”

“Oh, pudding, that can wait,” she said and started to move.

He gave himself over to the pleasure of her, all of her as they found their way through to the life they wanted to lead.

He would be with her every step on this path they agreed was just right for them, as their love paved the way to happily ever after.

EPILOGUE

THE SOUND of the key in the lock dragged Harley from a deep sleep, and she slowly opened her eyes. Aleksei entered wearing nothing but a pair of gray athletic shorts, fresh from his shower, his hair still damp against his broad shoulders. The room was still cast in early-morning darkness, and the light from the bathroom framed him in the indirect rectangle of brightness.

He was carrying two cups of coffee, and the smell seeped into her groggy senses.

Sweeping her hair back from her face, she raised up on one elbow. “Good morning,” she murmured, her voice husky with sleep.

The last two weeks since they returned from DC were taken up with briefings, long talks with Aleksei and the State Department, paperwork for him to be a full US citizen, her submission of her “close contact contract,” securing his finances, and reconciling with Isabelle, immensely grateful for her friendship. Aleksei had managed to transfer the bulk of his wealth to an American bank. Her eyes popped at the number of figures he had in there, and since the Russians were actually thankful for his intervention, they had released his father’s funds as well as his sister’s. His mother and sister were both well off and currently staying at a hotel while they searched for residences. Mila was looking for a job to keep her occupied.

This was the first morning and day they would have to themselves. He turned to look at her, an intimate warmth lighting up those gray eyes as he gave her a smile. He came over to the bed, setting his mug on the nightstand, then leaned over and placed hers on her side of the bed. Slipping back under the covers, he braced his hand on the pillow as he bent down to kiss her, his

mouth soft and warm, and tasting faintly of coffee. “Good morning, my little mouse,” he murmured against her lips. “I brought you coffee.”

“I can see that. How thoughtful.”

He slid his arms around her and kissed her again. The scent of cinnamon clung to him. She tightened her arms around him.

She felt him smile against her temple as he smoothed his hand up her naked back.

“But I’d rather have you.”

He laughed low and husky. “Again,” he said with mock suffering. “My ravenous little mouse.”

Harley gave him one last kiss then reluctantly pulled out of his arms and sat up. She stretched lazily and smiled up at him. Stacking the pillows against the headboard, he stretched out beside her, cradling her against the curve of his shoulder.

Resting her head against his chest, she snuggled against him.

“I can’t believe I didn’t wake up when you got up.”

“You were dead to the world. You didn’t move a muscle.”

That didn’t really surprise her. The vehemence of their lovemaking had left her completely spent, her body drugged by a heavy sated sensation, and she had fallen asleep in his arms almost immediately.

“How did you sleep?”

His jaw was rough with dark stubble. “First night I finally felt normal instead of hunted, now that everything is situated.” He turned to her. “Now that it is. I wanted to talk to you about what I want to do with my life.”

She brushed her lips against his jaw. “What is that?”

“I want to raise horses in Virginia. It’s famous for steeple chasing and horses have always been my passion. I think I would love to teach riding. I’m heartbroken that I had to leave Captain Hook behind.”

“I’m sorry about your horse, but if you want to raise them, I’m all for it. It doesn’t matter where I live in the DC area. I could keep my condo to make it easier when I have to work.” She looked at him. “You’re okay with me staying with the Shadowguard?”

“Of course, I want you to be happy.”

“I love you so much, Aleksei.”

Drawing in a deep, ragged breath, he slipped both arms around her and gathered her against him as he turned toward her, his hold almost savage. His voice was hoarse as he whispered against her hair. “I love you more.” He

shuddered and pressed his mouth against the hollow of her throat, his stubble rough and scratchy. "I don't know what I did to deserve you. I'm thankful and humbled by your love."

She swallowed hard, holding him tightly, slipping her hand up his neck until her fingers were buried in his thick hair.

The next two weeks were full of looking at properties and horses.

"I think I'll go for an even dozen."

"Properties," she asked with a little smile.

He chuckled. "No, horses."

"And the property?"

"The one in Middleburg. It's perfect."

It was gorgeous and her favorite. It featured a large house with good horse facilities, which included an eighteen-stall barn with wash stall, tack and feed room. One bedroom and three-bedroom apartments as well as a large indoor ring for teaching and training in all weather, nine paddocks and three larger pastures all fully fenced with plenty of room for a cross-country course with the sixty acres it came with.

It was a whirlwind of moving and furnishing the place, but finally the day came when they were going to move in.

Harley took his hand shortly after they put the finishing touches on the home and guided him down to the barn. "I have a surprise for you," she said. She opened the door and they walked into the interior.

Aleksei gasped when he saw the black horse in the first stall. "Captain Hook," he cried out and rushed to him as the stallion whickered. He petted him for several minutes. Then turned to her, grabbed her up, and whirled her around. "How did you make this happen?"

"I pulled some strings. I figured they aren't going to care if you take your horse out of Russia. I thought he should defect with you."

He laughed and kissed her softly.

"Now I have something to show you," he murmured.

She followed him to the front of the property where there was a drape over the sign. He pulled the cloth off and Harley smiled. "Jolly Roger Equestrian. Very fitting."

"It's also very fitting that I ask you something." He got down on one knee and pulled out a black velvet ring box. She covered her mouth and laughed. "Will you marry me, Harley?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes filling, her heart so full. He rose, opened the box

and she almost fainted. The ring was so gorgeous, sixteen emerald-cut diamonds set on a platinum band. He took it out of the box and slipped it on her finger.

She threw her arms around his neck and held onto him for several sweet moments. "I love you, my forever mouse."

When she let him go, he slipped his arm around her waist and drew her close. They turned and walked toward the house, toward their bright new future...together. Forever and happily ever.

* * *

SAM "BUCK" Buckard pulled up his mount at the crest of the small hill, giving the reins a light jerk as the big buckskin gelding danced and tossed his head. D-Day, riding one of his more challenging horses, a big Palomino named Cash, named after the legendary singer, Johnny Cash, came alongside him. Cash was one of the best cow horses the ranch owned and after this drive, he was going to retire to stud.

"My dad is about ready to hire you, pardner."

"Oh, yeah? It's really tempting." D-Day breathed deep. "It's freaking beautiful out here, Buck. What a great place to come home to."

"That it is, my friend." It was good to get back to his roots, remind him where he came from, and keep him humble and what he stood for. His mind traveled back to Chiara and her disdainful, lovesick sidekick. She could easily give him a big head and he didn't mind getting knocked down a notch or two. High-class women equaled high maintenance. Best to remember that.

They were in the middle of their fall roundup and if Buck wasn't deployed, he hightailed it back home to participate. The Bucking Horse cattle spent the summer grazing on the adjacent national forest land until the last week in September when they gathered the herd before winter arrived. It was challenging because the cows were scattered over a fifty-mile area of aspen and pine forests and small clearings. Right now, D-Day and Buck were rustling up the stragglers of elusive bovines.

He reached for his cell phone and not taking his eyes off the dark shapes, he hit the redial button, waited, then spoke into the mouthpiece. "Cheyenne, there are four or five strays heading back into the forest. Send Pete with one of the dogs to bring 'em in."

He watched as a rider and one dog broke from the main herd. His horse threw his head again and impatiently tugged at the reins, and Buck gave him a second command, then settled back in the saddle. That slant of the late afternoon sun angled beneath the brim of his Stetson, and he squinted against it, the taste of dust drying in his mouth as he surveyed the state of the herd.

They looked good, fat and happy after a well-grazing summer.

Bucking Horse hands were making the final repairs to the vast network of corrals, preparing for the job ahead. Today was the final drive. The cut would take place the following day, when the calves would be separated from their mothers. That's when the backbreaking work would begin. Tagging, vaccinating, and branding each calf, and dehorning and castrating those that needed it.

A rancher's entire year and the viability of the herd revolved around that operation. Bucking Horse Ranch's future and fortunes depended on it.

And had for over a hundred and twenty years.

He loved how his family's ranch was steeped in history. He stared out at the aspens that lined the fence. They had stood for as long as he could remember. Slender, strong, flexible, able to weather any storm. He respected their tenacity and durability. He swore he learned everything he needed to know from those trees and his daddy and momma.

"Yeah, I envy you, Buck."

Impatient with his rider's stillness, the big gelding pranced and yanked on the bit, his hooves tramping down grasses.

D-Day laughed. "Is that called chomping on the bit, Buckaroo?"

A small twist of humor lifted the corner of Buck's mouth, and he reached forward and patted his mount's neck.

"Shore is. Let's git them elusive doggies, D."

"Yahoo and Hoo-Yah!" he shouted before digging his spurs into the horse's side and taking off.

Buck chuckled and took off after him.

* * *

SHE STOOD on the balcony overlooking the gorgeous turquoise-blue water. True to her word, Bree had given in to Sofy's demands, and they were back in Greece.

The whole freaking team.

Who were currently riding jet skis all over the place. Those men did love the water, and she loved one man very deeply. It was clear to her that her friend Isabelle was still head over heels in love with Gator. Then there was Pippa—Philippa, a gorgeous redhead and Joker's wife. Bree squealed when she found out that Pippa ran one of the House of Toscano Boutiques, and that Joker was her son. She loved Giorgia Toscano fashions. Then there was the beautiful, prim, and sweet Julia, Professor's wife, who she knew relatively well as she had been at the embassy working on the USAID staff. Julia was now writing grants for nonprofits. Isabelle had given up her ambassadorship to move to San Diego with Gator. She was busy taking some time off to make a home for them. Isabelle, badass CIA Shadowguard operative, and even more impressive ambassador to Niger was being domestic. Did it get any better than that?

So yeah, Christos had invited them all to his eleven-bedroom, fifteen-bathroom estate for a whole week, and it was winding down. The boys were going to be off leave and back on active duty. She would return to her wonderful job.

She could say the honeymoon was over.

"They are just like kids," Pippa said, her eyes following her husband as he opened the throttle and raced Gator.

"Definitely," Isabelle said with affection. "Big, deadly kids."

Julia chuckled. "Exactly. My husband is a sharpshooting child."

They all laughed softly.

Isabelle turned to Bree. "I got news today from Harley." She sighed. "I miss that girl. Anyway, Aleksei proposed. They're getting married right away at a civil ceremony. We're all invited."

"I'm so happy for them," Bree said wistfully. The thought of getting hitched to Blitz for the rest of her life was supremely appealing.

Bree turned as Christos rang the bell that meant dinner was going to be served any minute, and if the guys wanted to eat like civilized human beings, there would be no bathing suits and dripping hair at the table. They needed to get out of the water.

Which made her think of Bree's introduction to Blitz's dad, the rocky start to Blitz's attempt to reconcile with his father. Instead of talking, Blitz listened, and his father finally, reluctantly came around, especially after Blitz explained to him why he made the decision he did. His father finally listened.

It had been an exhausting, but wonderful trip. Bree loved his mom and sisters. They were so much fun. It was nice that his family was so close.

The guys started to filter in as they headed toward their respective rooms, showers, and a change of clothes, and especially towel-dried hair.

Christos put on an amazing spread with traditional Greek dishes and an abundance of seafood. When the meal was over, Blitz took Bree's hand and asked, "Walk on the beach?"

The sun was going down and the colors of the sky were breathtaking in red, gold, and orange. He clasped her hand, and they walked toward the stairs that would take them down to the beach.

"Isabelle got some news."

"Aleksei proposed?"

"How did you know?"

He chuckled. "He emailed me."

"Oh, you're friends. How sweet."

He shrugged.

They walked for a little bit longer, then Blitz stopped and turned to her, taking her hands.

"When you know what's what, it's best just to say what's on your mind and in your heart." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a box, a small velvet box, the kind that held...engagement rings. Her heart leapt into her throat and started hammering. "I love you, Bree, beyond reason, beyond space, beyond time. I love you. Will you marry me?"

He opened the ring box, and she experienced such a rush of love, it nearly suffocated her. She inhaled slowly before she looked up from the exquisite twinkling large diamond, nestled between two small ones.

She huffed. "Is this going to be through thick and thin, growing old, having children, and getting regular sex every day?"

"Every day?" He raised his brow. "I'm afraid so. I know it's going to be tough, but I'm a big, bad frogman and you're my frogman babe."

"I'll marry you on one condition."

"Name it."

"It's one of those fancy-smancy military ones and I get a SEAL babe T-shirt, and one of those tridents would be nice."

He frowned, made a big deal about counting her conditions on his fingers. "That's three conditions."

She nudged him. "Ha, you can still do math. That's a good sign."

“Done,” he said with a chuckle. Removing the ring, he slipped it on her finger. “Military wedding, huh? You know you’re going to get slapped on the butt by a sword.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Don’t tempt me with a good time, sailor.”

She kissed his mouth, her heart full and bursting with love. They had overcome their emotional obstacles, and the future was looking very bright along that path they continued to pave.

* * *

THANK you so much for reading! Next up is *Kodiak*. I left my guys and readers in turmoil, but that’s about to change when Iceman, Preacher, and GQ do what needs to be done. Kodiak and the team head to Sidney, Australia to neutralize another threat from NSH and he gets entangled with Australian Federal Police CTSI Investigator Kaiya Kurrama who resonates with him. But Kaiya isn’t going to take a back seat to the threat to her citizens and country or let this alpha male run roughshod over her...even if he melts her bones. Whether or not they can overcome their personal and professional obstacles amid the brutal backdrop of NSH remains to be seen as their happily ever after hangs in the balance. Don’t miss this exciting story of my SEAL Team Tier 1 series.

GLOSSARY

- BO - Basic Orientation (BUD/S)
- BUD/S - Basic Underwater Demolitions/SEAL training
- Comm - The equipment that SEALs use to communicate with each other in the field.
- CO - Commanding Officer
- CTT - Combat Training Tank
- DEVGRU - The United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG), formerly SEAL Team Six
- DoD - Department of Defense
- DOR - Drop on Request
- DZ - Drop zone, the targeted area for parachutists.
- HALO - High altitude, low opening jump from an aircraft.
- HVT - High value target
- IBS - Inflatable Boat, Small
- IED - Improvised Explosive Device
- Klicks - Shortened word for kilometers.
- LRRP - Long-range reconnaissance patrol.
- LT - Nickname for lieutenant.
- LZ - Landing Zone where aircraft can land.
- Merc - Mercenary - guns for hire.
- MWD - Military Working Dog
- MRE - Meals, Ready-to-Eat, portable in pouches and packed with calories, these packaged meals are used in the field.
- NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

- NCIS - Naval Criminal Investigative Service
- NWU - Navy Working Uniform
- OIC - Officer in Charge
- REACT - Regional Enforcement Action Capabilities Team
- RIB - Rigid Inflatable Boat
- RPG - Rocket Propelled Grenade
- R&R - Rest and Relaxation
- Tango -Hostile combatants.
- SERE -Stands for survival, evasion, resistance, escape. The principles of avoiding the enemy in the field.
- Six - Military speak for watching a man's back.
- SO - Special Operator
- SPIES - Special Patrol Insertion & Extraction System
- UDT - Underwater Demolitions Team

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoe Dawson lives in North Carolina, one of the friendliest states in the US. She discovered romance in her teens and has been spinning stories in her head ever since. Her heroes are sexy males with a disregard for danger and whether reluctant, gung-ho, or caught up in the action, show their hearts of gold.

Her imagination runs wild with romances from sensual to scorching including romantic comedy, new adult, romantic suspense, small town, and urban fantasy. Look below to explore the many avenues to her writing. She believes it's all about the happily ever afters and always will.

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