



# HIDDEN CHANCE

Hidden Alliance Book 4

SHAWNA COLEING

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# Chapter 1

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THE DEER FROZE. Only its ears twitched in response to a new sound in the forest.

Robby watched the doe's glowing eyes through his night-vision goggles as she looked right at him, but she didn't see him—not until he lifted his hand to gesture for his men to continue forward.

At the motion, the deer sprang off, and Robby led his team deeper into the dense forest, a faux-green light illuminating the foliage through their goggles as they went.

With over a mile yet to cover, and only a few more hours of night left, they had no time to lose.

The progress was slow. It was impossible to tell how close the enemy might be, so stealth was of the utmost importance.

After twenty minutes, they stopped to get their bearings. If the information they'd received was correct, they would be coming upon a small village school tucked against the mountain.

Based on their intel, this Burmese school wasn't teaching reading and

writing, but had become the home base for a local militia who had raided every village in the area. Mostly, they had been taking whatever supplies they needed for their group, but there had also been several massacres, and kidnappings were not uncommon.

This wasn't the first time Robby and his team had been hired out to deal with a situation like this. It was a delicate operation, as reports had surfaced that children were being kept onsite and used as human shields, among other things, and Robby's team was known for their precision. With so many lives already lost, their mission was to retrieve information on the movements and whereabouts of other parts of the militia, remove as much of the threat as possible, and do it all with zero civilian casualties. They'd done it before, and Robby was confident they could do it again.

"Holland?" he questioned the man on his right.

"Two-hundred and fifty meters through those trees."

"Good. Perez and Mitchell, you're with me. Holland, Green, Evans, see you around back."

Robby led the two men one way, while the others headed in the opposite direction. They circled to the front of the school.

Movement ahead had Robby pausing like the deer, his senses sharp and his muscles ready for action. The two men following did the same.

He pointed at Mitchell, then at the guard he'd spotted close to their position. Mitchell nodded and moved silently through the trees, then neutralized the threat.

They continued but soon came upon another. Robby took this one, moving carefully before taking him out.

The coast was clear the rest of the way before they reached the front of the school and reconnected with their team. Holland held up three fingers, showing how many men they'd subdued.

Five guards to cover the small school meant they were onto something big. Robby motioned to get his men ready for a silent breach, and they moved closer to the front door where the spine of a dead bougainvillea crept up to the roof and met the vines that tore at the sagging planks.

He led the way to the porch, edging up the stairs to the entryway. His men joined him near the door, getting into position before Robby tested the handle. It was locked but flimsy.

Robby took a step back, allowing Perez to get into position. Each man knew his role.

It was only a moment before the door was nudged open, then they waited, listening.

Silence met them from within, but that didn't mean it was safe. They all knew the risks of entry. They had to be ready for anything.

When Robby gave the nod, their entry was swift and noiseless as they cleared the first room. It was a large space full of desks. The blackboard on the far end was covered in foreign swearwords and rude pictures.

While half the team went to a door at the back, Robby and the rest approached an open door closest to their position.

The floorboards creaked as they crossed the room and found it was packed with bunk beds full of sleeping children.

Robby ignored the crush in his stomach as he scanned the boys' faces to confirm there weren't any adults among them. It was the anniversary of his brother's death. A day when he still battled with the pain of his loss. It made the lives of these boys—even though his brother had been older—a personal priority for him, despite the importance of keeping emotion out of it.

"What do you think?" Evans spoke softly at Robby's back.

"I think we're safe, but you never know." Child soldiers were often used in the militias and couldn't be discounted in this situation.

As he crossed the room, one of the kids sat up. It was a precarious moment. Evans was at the door, prepared to shoot if necessary, but the boy only looked at them wide-eyed. Robby eased his finger away from the trigger as he lifted another to his lips. The boy continued to stare, so Robby pushed his goggles up to expose his face. Then, he slowly moved closer and crouched beside the bed.

"American," he whispered to the boy, hoping it would help. Sometimes it did. Sometimes it didn't.

This time, the boy nodded, and Robby put his finger to his lips once more before rejoining his men. Besides Evans, who was covering him, the rest of his men were waiting in the main room.

"Guard this door," he said to Evans as he passed him. "I don't want anyone in or out." He lowered his voice. "And keep an eye on the boys. We don't know if they're all on our side."

"You got it, Boss."

"The rest of the school has been cleared," Holland said. "There's no one else here."

"Then we've missed something." Robby went to the back room and

checked for himself. All that was there were a few pieces of broken furniture.

“We’ve definitely missed something.” He turned in a circle. “These kids wouldn’t be here on their own.”

“And they wouldn’t need five guards,” Holland added. “But it’s a small building.”

Robby hurried outside, no longer worried about the creaking floorboards. “There’s more here somewhere.”

He jogged around the school, checking for anything suspicious, but the yard was clear.

“Our intel didn’t say anything about the kids other than they were being used as cover,” Holland said when Robby joined him again.

“Exactly. Cover for what?” He squeezed the back of his neck. It had taken him six intensive months of undercover work to discover the location of this school. In that time, a whole village ten miles from here had been wiped out. He couldn’t let that happen again.

Reentering the school, his boots forced more groans from the aging wood floors. He stopped mid-stride and squatted, pressing a hand to the floor.

“What is it?” Holland said.

“I think I know where they are.”

He went back to the boys’ room where several more had awoken and were watching silently or whispering to one another.

Robby marched across the floor, his steps silent as he went, confirming his suspicions. Then, he kneeled beside the boy he’d spoken to earlier.

“Where is it? *Bhaalmharlell*?”

The boy shook his head.

“The door. *Tanhkarr*. Where is it?”

The boy’s eyes flicked sideways toward another bunk. Robby turned, flicked his goggles back down, then dropped his head to the ground. He could see the handle of a hatch there.

“It’s there,” he said to his team. “Under that bed.”

“If we’re going in,” Holland said, “we’d better do it now. Who knows how long these kids will cooperate.”

“I’d say whoever’s down there already knows we’re here. Perez, Evans, you get these kids out of here. If we don’t come back out of the hole, you take them to safety. Holland, Mitchell, Green, you’re with me.”

“With all due respect,” Evans said. “If you don’t come out, we’re going in to get you.”

“I’ve given you an order.”

Perez and Evans shared a look, and Robby knew he’d allowed his past issues to interfere with the operation. Their priority on this mission was to take out the enemy and gather intel. And while it was crucial to make sure no undue life was lost, his men weren’t babysitters, and he’d chosen them because he trusted them to make decisions based on their extensive experience without him needing to micromanage.

“If we don’t come out, I expect you to make the right decision. But there’s no point in us all dying unnecessarily.”

“We understand, sir,” Perez said.

“Right. Let’s get moving.”

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Once the kids were clear, they lifted the bed away from the hatch.

“I take it you all noticed the three empty beds?” Robby asked, and they nodded. “We should assume that there are boys missing and go down the hole with that in mind.”

“Yes, sir,” Holland said.

Robby nodded at Mitchell, who pulled the door up and stepped clear while Robby checked the opening, which remained vacant.

He listened for sound and thought he heard a whimper, but it was impossible to tell.

“We go in hard and fast,” he said. “Ready?”

His men nodded, and he tossed a flash grenade, angling it so it landed out of sight before exploding.

They dropped through the hole in quick succession, identifying themselves and calling for surrender as they entered a large bunker with their weapons ready.

A volley of shouting erupted as Robby and his men found a group of three men along the back wall holding kids in front of them.

Robby’s senses were at full alert as he took in the hostage situation, as well as the crates that were piled high to his left, probably filled with ammunition and other weapons. To his right and along the other wall was a table with a laptop with a pile of papers and two filing cabinets underneath.

An uneasy silence finally settled on the room when Robby lifted a hand,



signaling they would yield.

They'd trained for this. It was why his team was hired over others, and it was why he'd chosen Holland, Mitchell, and Green to stay with him. They were his best marksmen. They'd completed each of their previous missions with a hundred-percent success rate. He intended to add this one to that list.

Slowly, Robby lowered his gun while his other hand raised higher. He watched the enemies until he noted the subtle change in their countenance as they relaxed, believing they had won, and prepared for the surrender.

That's when Robby's finger twitched, and three simultaneous shots were fired. The boys screamed as the three militants slumped to the floor. Two of the boys jumped from their dead captors, but one boy remained.

"You shot him!" Robby said in a rare moment of panic as he ran for the boy. "Who shot him?"

He looked at Holland, who was making sure the men were dead. "Was that us?" Robby demanded of his teammates.

Holland took off his helmet and tucked it under his arm before he crouched beside Robby, checking the entry wound.

"That's not ours. He must have gotten off a round at the same time we did." He pursed his lips and looked long and hard at Robby. It was a warning look. As the team's leader, Robby couldn't afford to get emotional in front of his men. They'd debrief later, after their nerves had settled and the details were clearer.

Normally, this kind of thing wasn't an issue for Robby to control. It was part of the job, and even though it was always hard, today he'd reacted out of turn.

He squeezed the bridge of his nose to reset himself, then stood.

Holland slapped him on the back. "We saved the others. That's more than most."

Robby cleared his throat. "We'll gather everything on the table and do a quick inventory of what's in these boxes, then get these boys home. If they still have one. Green, radio to the others and let them know our mission was successful. Well done."

Those last words were hard to say, but they *had* done well, and they needed to know it whether they'd admit it or not. It wouldn't be easy on any of them to lose one.

After one last look at the dead boy, he pushed the death from his mind. They'd try to find his parents, and, if not, he would make sure the boy had a

proper burial. But tonight, they still had work to do.

Mitchell slipped the laptop in a bag from under the table, and Robby pushed a few of the papers around to see if anything stood out. They had people back at headquarters to comb through all of this stuff and find every clue they could gather. There would be no scrap of information left untouched. But he needed a clue to focus on. These eight men on site that they'd taken out were the tip of the iceberg. There were more that had to be held accountable for the atrocities that had taken place.

He flipped open a file, sliding the pages out of the way until he found a document in English. It had a business letterhead with a U.S. address.

"You ever heard of a company called TreadCraft Dynamics?" he asked the room.

Holland leaned over his shoulder to get a look. "Address in Pittsburgh? Nope. But I'm sure you'll know everything about them by the time we enter U.S. airspace."

Robby folded the letter and tucked it into his shirt. "It won't take me that long. I'm heading back up. Get the rest of this stuff collected. We'll let our local contact organize the extraction and inventory of these crates. The sun will be coming up soon, and I want to make sure these kids have a place to go before we leave."

"You do realize —"

"I know. But we can't abandon them in the forest." He stared down Holland, who finally nodded. He was the team member Robby had known the longest, and he'd grown to rely on the man's steadfastness. While Robby would have trouble getting the dead boy out of his head, Holland was the type of guy who lived for the mission with little thought beyond that. He was better at compartmentalizing. Holland had no problem with taking the kids back to the village; it was the vulnerability he could see in Robby that he was resisting.

"Of course we won't," Holland said. "But don't forget that this mission will be lauded as a success."

"I know." Robby looked back at the dead boy, and patted his shirt to remind himself that they now had a lead. If the roots of this militia led back to the U.S., he had a chance at finding the center of this thing and killing the whole tree. "That boy gave his life, and I'm going to make sure it's not wasted."

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## Chapter 2

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HANNAH DUG into her purse for her ID, her heels clicking on the sidewalk as she hurried toward the imposing building ahead. Its sleek glass panels, accented by steel columns, were accentuated by the dynamic LED lighting that made quite a statement when the sun went down.

TreadCraft Dynamics had started out as a small family-run business, but, in the last ten years since the family had sold it, it had grown into an imposing company that made an impact all over the world.

It was this company that had brought Hannah to Pittsburgh at a time when she'd felt lost. After spending years moving from state to state, looking for that promise she knew was waiting for her, she'd come close to giving up. Then, when the time was right, God finally moved, and here she was—although not without a fight.

When she'd come across the job listing, she'd been reluctant. She'd only ever worked for smaller businesses, and the idea that she would allow herself to be swallowed up by a machine had her clicking past the advertisement. But two weeks later, she couldn't get it out of her head. It had taken her until the

last day of submissions to apply. Then, when they'd contacted her to set up a video interview, she'd nearly turned them down. She didn't like the idea of an interview being so impersonal. It was only after she made an effort to research the company that she discovered all the good work they were doing beyond the interests of their product and finally relented.

The move to the city had been overwhelming, and her introduction to the building that first day had her head spinning. But she was no stranger to adversity and stress. Growing up on the mission field in Burma meant she'd been through difficult situations and had endured trauma that God had used to strengthen her and prepare her for what He knew lay ahead.

She dodged around a surge of pedestrian traffic as she hurried up the broad stairs to the front doors. Even now, she felt a slight tightening in her chest as the doors slid noiselessly apart to welcome her into the broad lobby of the company that God had used to fill her insatiable desire to help others. The millions of dollars the company spent helping kids by building schools and giving local small businesses grants to support families meant that, every day, even though her day-to-day work didn't go directly to helping them, she got to be a part of it.

She offered God the same prayer she did most days she came to work, thanking Him for this opportunity and asking Him to give her the opportunity to work directly with the fundraising efforts and be a part of the small groups they sent over to look for new opportunities and build relationships. She knew it was coming. She could feel it. God didn't have her there just to manage a department. This was His deep answer to her longing. He would use her position to make an impact and give a long-term answer to the kids in Burma.

She was eager to do more but also knew God was still digging out some of the pain from her past. The faces of the dead still met her in her sleep. She'd been too young when she'd seen tragedies. Her mind struggled to process them fully even now, and God had led her on a journey that pushed her to continue to rely on Him for peace.

She shivered off the cold as she entered the warm lobby that continued with the exterior's steel and glass look. A warmer choice for the interior would have been nice, especially after leaving the frosty morning behind.

Displays lined one wall, showcasing the company's achievements in tire technology and further innovations they'd mastered in various areas of rubber manufacturing. That was her professional domain as a research manager. But

it was the largest display that she focused on as she passed. It showcased images of schools and smiling children. And while a company this size would always focus on profit, a virtuous image enhanced the bottom line, and that meant, no matter what the reason, children were being helped. Her goal now was to convince them that, with her at the helm of their initiatives, they could not only help more people but increase revenue at the same time.

She smiled back at the faces in the photos. Knowing that they had a chance at a future brimming with opportunity where others did not, eased the sting of the past.

“Morning,” said the security guard as Hannah scanned her badge.

“Morning, Kara.”

“Good luck today.”

Hannah stopped and looked back at her. “How do you know about today?”

“Word gets around.”

“Should I take that as a good or a bad thing?”

“If I were you, I’d take it as a good thing. Use whatever is at hand to boost your confidence.”

“That’s good advice. I’m going to steal it and then pass it on when the time is right.”

Kara smiled. “Let me know how it turns out.”

“I will.”

Hannah headed toward the bank of elevators.

“Morning, guys,” she said, joining the others as they watched the numbers descend on the panels above the doors.

“You look sharp today,” said a woman a few years older than her who had on a white lab coat. Marissa had been a technician in Hannah’s department since she’d started.

“Big meeting today,” Hannah said with a flat grin.

Marissa grunted. “I heard.”

Hannah gave her a sideways look. “So did everyone, apparently.”

“I don’t envy you. Give me my computer and gadgets any day of the week. I’d rather write reports until the wee hours of the morning than have to listen to those stuffed shirts drone on. Or worse, have to convince them of something.”

The elevator dinged its arrival, and the group stepped on.

“Don’t forget those stuffed shirts give you your paycheck,” said a man in

a lab coat. Hannah was pretty sure his name was Brian.

“They’re not so bad,” Hannah said. “They do a lot to help people in need.”

Marissa grunted again. “Only because it makes them look good.”

“I don’t care. I’ll take what I can get. Besides, they’ve got me on their heels to keep them in check. And today, I’m going to convince them to reach into their pockets a little deeper. We all know how kids are treated on the rubber plantations, and I want to make sure TreadCraft Dynamics leads the way in looking after them and their families. We’re the leaders in the industry. We should be leading the way in how we take care of others no matter where on the totem pole they stand.”

“Is that part of your speech?”

Hannah let out a breath. “It is. Do you like it?”

“You’ve got my vote,” Brian said. “But I don’t think I’m your target audience.” The doors slid open on the lab floor. “Good luck.”

Half the elevator emptied.

She focused on the floor as they continued to climb, mouthing out the introduction she’d planned for the meeting.

“I’ve always wondered if you were one of those virtuous types.” Charles was the IP manager, although Hannah wasn’t really sure what that meant. She had little to do with him, so it was hard to tell if he’d meant his comment to be disparaging or not.

Thankfully, the doors opened, so she didn’t need to discuss it further.

“Break a leg,” he said as she stepped off ahead of him. He chuckled under his breath as they went their separate ways.

The cubicles in the bullpen were mostly empty as they usually were at that time of the morning, but she knew the offices would already have their occupants getting ready for the meeting. She stopped and pressed a hand to her stomach to settle her nerves, then veered sideways to stop at an office to the left.

A man in his early forties, wearing a well-fitting suit, looked up from his computer. “Morning,” he said, pushing his keyboard back so she could see he was giving her his full attention.

“Morning, Pike.” Pike was her boss and was always positive when he spoke to her, though he’d tried to talk her out of this meeting. In the end, he’d relented, and he’d been supportive since then. She needed more of that positivity now.

“How’re you feeling?”

“A little nervous, if I’m honest.”

“You don’t look it. You look fantastic. Power suit and all—but are you still sure you want to do this?”

“That’s why I stopped by.”

“You’ve changed your mind?”

“No. I’m more sure than ever. I know you wanted me to drop it, but I need that encouragement you gave me the other day. I respect your advice as my boss.”

“But you don’t always follow it.”

She shrugged. “I wouldn’t be a very good employee if I couldn’t think for myself.”

“That’s one of the things I like the most about you. The other is that you stick to your convictions. When you’ve set your mind to something, you do not relent. That’s not always a good thing, but I like it in an employee.”

She couldn’t take all the credit for her determination. She’d been praying about it for weeks and felt certain that God was leading her to follow through despite the numerous times she’d almost given up. When she’d woken up this morning, she’d thanked Him for the positive outcome she expected. But entering the building had stolen some of her confidence.

“All right. If you’re sure, then I support you a hundred percent. Don’t worry about the guys at the meeting. If you feel overwhelmed, look at me. I’ll be smiling. Focus on that, but don’t be afraid to look the others in the eye.”

“Thank you. That’s what I needed.”

“Any time. I’ll see you in there.”

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Robby adjusted himself in the seat after giving up on sleeping. The roar of the plane’s engines usually sent him right off. He could typically sleep anywhere, especially on long-haul flights between countries.

Green was snoring across the aisle. Evans, who got by on a few hours’ sleep a night, was reading next to him. It was a benefit to a job like this, but Robby had missed out on that gift. He was exhausted and could use a solid few hours to get him home, but when he closed his eyes, the dead kid met him there—or was it his brother? It wasn’t a pleasant experience, and no

matter how much he tried, the image wouldn't go.

He leaned his head back on the seat and let out a long, slow breath before pulling the folded sheet from his pocket.

He read it again, hoping that maybe his exhausted fog would somehow uncover a truth he hadn't spotted before.

His finger traced down the itemized list of supplies, including computers and books, supposedly for the school they'd come from.

Before they'd left the bunker, he'd done a quick scan of the crates and found that some of the numbers matched. A less experienced man might call it coincidence, but in his line of work, very little could be pushed aside as a fluke.

That wasn't the only question mark regarding the list. The school itself had no electricity supply to anywhere but the bunker.

The question he needed to answer was whether or not TreadCraft Dynamics knew their funds were being misused. His gut told him it was impossible they wouldn't know. A company that size would have checks and balances. Even though the connection was untenable, he was already convinced that, if it wasn't the company that was responsible, then it was an inside job. Robby would find those responsible and make sure whoever was involved paid for their crimes.

He went through the list again until the numbers scrambled in front of his eyes. He blinked, and each time he closed his eyes, he found it harder to open them until he fell into a restless sleep with pale faces haunting his dreams.



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## Chapter 3

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“AND THAT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” Hannah pressed her fingers into the tabletop to stress her final point, “is why TreadCraft Dynamics would benefit from increasing not just donations but also on-the-ground support. We must never underestimate our donors’ influence and that, without them, this company would not be what it is today. With TreadCraft leading the way in philanthropy, as they do in the rubber industry, we will set an example for other companies to follow, and, further, communities around them will flourish.”

She straightened, then held her breath, resisting the frown that tugged at her lips. It wasn’t that she had expected applause, but a smile or two would have been nice. Her gaze drifted around the table and settled on Pike for a moment. His face wore a supportive wince. He knew the audience better than she did, but she couldn’t give in to fear. It was up to God from here on out. She’d done her part, and now it was time for Him to do His.

“Thank you for your presentation,” said a woman sitting near the far end of the table. “The committee will certainly take your data under advisement.”

“Thank you, Marty, and I thank everyone here for their time.”

Marty Beechwood was a serious woman, but Hannah had always gotten along with her and found that she would always take a few moments out of her busy schedule to talk.

The older gentleman sitting at the head of the table was a different story. Henry Burns was the CEO of TreadCraft. She hadn't expected him at the meeting and hoped it had been a good sign.

He cleared his throat. “I'd like to add, Miss Reynolds,” he said, shifting in his chair, “that you are ranging far outside your purview. As I understand it, you are a research manager, are you not?”

“I am, sir. However, part of my job description is to recognize new avenues of possibility for this company.”

“You certainly took that to heart. I very much doubt that was the intentional meaning when it was written.”

“Perhaps, but when I joined TreadCraft Dynamics, it was not simply because of the incredible products you were creating or the groundbreaking research. It was because I believed in the good you are doing already, and I felt I had a great deal to offer not just in my current role but beyond that.”

She often daydreamed about working exclusively in the area of the charitable contributions the company made. It was a crazy idea, and she knew it, but she still liked to dream, and she knew that God could do anything.

“It is my understanding,” she continued, “that this company was founded on principles of philanthropy —”

“Be that as it may, we're going to need you to stick to your lane from now on.”

“Does that mean —”

“You've had your turn. We have many important things to discuss, and after the time you must have taken from your usual duties to put together this presentation, I'm sure you're behind on your work. Feel free to return to it. There's no need for you to remain for the duration.”

Hannah opened her mouth to defend herself but quickly closed it again. She wanted to explain that she'd prepared everything outside of work, but looking around the table, she knew it would be a waste of time. Henry had come into this meeting for the sole purpose of putting her in her place. All her presentation had done was set her back.

Pike smiled apologetically when she caught his eye on her way out.

She focused on the floor as she left the conference room and hurried past

the cubicles to her office. When she shut the door, she was out of breath, and the tears that had been pushing for release finally ran down her cheeks. She wanted to slide to the floor and weep. She'd bared her heart and soul, expecting her enthusiasm to rub off on a few of them, but instead, she'd been humiliated.

"God, I was so sure we had this. I felt certain you were with me on this." She tried to encourage herself that she couldn't know where things would go from here. The influence of her message may have sunk in for someone who would push for the same things she believed in. But all it felt like she was doing was clutching at straws.

"Surely I didn't hear you wrong, God. Surely you had some purpose in all of this. Or did I have some chaff that needed burning off? 'Cause I definitely feel burned. Is that all that was?"

Nothing met her but the sound of phones ringing outside her door.

"Fine, then if you won't clarify this for me, could you at least open the floor and let me fall through?" She looked down at her toes. "No? Not even that?" She continued to watch the floor at her feet. "This is your last chance."

It was hard to move to her desk. Moving meant continuing forward, and she had no idea where to go from there.

She collapsed into her chair. "Next year, it won't matter." That's what her dad used to say if she was ever embarrassed or made a mistake. He would remind her that, in a year, all would be forgotten, and it wouldn't matter so much anymore.

For a few minutes, she allowed herself the luxury of considering writing a letter of resignation. She wasn't one to give up because of a little setback, but she wasn't against thinking about quitting just this once. She could storm out of the office in outrageous triumph and accomplish absolutely nothing with the act except being out of a job.

She made blew a raspberry, then woke her computer. If only Mr. Burns had been right and she *was* behind on her work, then she'd have something frantic to do to keep her mind off her failure.

After opening up the latest figures she was creating a report for, it took her a solid twenty minutes before she could keep her mind focused on it for more than thirty seconds. Then she heard a soft knock on the door. Maybe it was Marty coming to apologize and tell her what wonderful ideas she had.

"Please, God, let it be good news," she mumbled as she wiped her fingers under her eyes to remove any makeup that had gotten smeared, then said,

“Come in.”

Pike stuck his head through the door. “You have a minute? Or should I let you mourn your loss a bit longer?”

“That depends. Did you come here to gloat?”

“You know I was on your side in there. If I had any say in the matter, maybe it would have been a different outcome. But I did warn you.”

“So, no gloating, but you had to fit in an ‘I told you so’?”

“Come on, Hannah, I’m not telling you anything you didn’t already know. It was a long shot. A very long shot, and you gave it your best. You did better than anyone else would have.” He made himself comfortable in the chair across her desk.

“Maybe if my ideas rated higher against a profit-and-loss statement.”

“That’s not the only thing holding it back, and it doesn’t mean I’m not proud of you.”

“That’s not what you really think.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because you looked just as dismayed as the rest of them.”

“That wasn’t dismay on my face. I was feeling for you in there. But I’ve got to tell you, your presentation was top-notch. It was mentioned after you left. Maybe we’re not using your strengths as well as we could. Where’d you get those photos from, anyway?”

“Lots of places. I spent hours—of my own time, mind you—poring through everything I could find. I went through every nook and cranny of this company I could.”

“I bet you did more than that.”

“I’ll admit I went way above and beyond the call of duty.”

Pike sighed heavily. “You are an incredible asset to this company. If you put all that hard work into the areas you’re actually paid for, you could really get ahead.”

“I want to do what I’m passionate about.”

“But for what? You shouldn’t have gone through so much trouble when you couldn’t be confident of the outcome.”

“That’s the trouble. I was confident. I was sure I had it.”

“Okay then, why don’t we come at this from a different angle? Perhaps you should take into consideration how much this company already does and how much they give. Asking them to do —”

“That’s not entirely true. Most of what they do comes from donor money,

not money out of their own pockets. Don't get me wrong, I'm very impressed with what they're able to achieve. It's the reason I came to work here in the first place. I just think there's more to be done."

"TreadCraft is not a charity. Our very valuable resources are used to continue the groundbreaking work we do here. That's what this company is about. Giving back is extra."

"We had record profits last year and a record number of approvals for our research from the government. This company is on fire, and it may be the worst thing that's happened to them."

"I can't believe you really think that. TreadCraft gave an increase of ten percent more last year, and we're on track to give even more this year."

"Because of donors."

"Now we're going in circles. Look, don't give up on your dream. Earlier, you said you respect my advice. Well, my advice right now is to sit tight and bide your time. Put all your effort into climbing the corporate ladder until you're in a greater position of influence. Then you'll have more power to wield. And in the meantime, pray to that god you believe in. Maybe he can help."

"I pray all the time. I prayed about that meeting."

"He was probably too busy today to help." His smile slipped into a frown when he saw the look on her face. "I don't mean to offend you. I love that you're a Christian. It's adorable, and it's a breath of fresh air around here when the bottom line drives everything. Don't lose that, but keep your nose out of the way, or it's going to get snapped off. You want to do good? Go serve at a soup kitchen. And pray for me while you're at it."

That got her attention. "Really?"

"Yeah. I'm up for a raise, and I've been buttering Marty up. If you could ask him to whisper sweet nothings into her ear, I think she's lonely and could use a little pick me up."

"I've got work to do."

"Good, I'm glad to see you're back on track." He stood. "Don't let this get you down, okay? There'll be more opportunities in the future."

"Thanks."

She clenched her jaw, staring daggers into his back when he left the room. She would have screamed if she'd had a pillow to muffle it in. Pike demeaning her faith like that grated to her core. She'd experienced more heartache in her short life than most of the people in this building. She was

not soft, and neither was her God. If she knew Pike would think her faith was cute, she never would have made her position clear in the first place. She'd never shied away from proclaiming her beliefs, but it was the first time anyone had treated it like a pretty, frilly thing, and she wasn't impressed.

She tried to go back to her work, but Pike's visit had irritated her to a distraction she couldn't return from. Pushing back in her chair, she decided to pay the labs a visit. Marissa would love the opportunity to explain the intricacies of the latest experiments they were running. Hannah wouldn't understand a word of it, but she couldn't listen very well, anyway.

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Robby kept his hands clasped behind his back as he stood before the wide desk covered with piles of documents, waiting for his boss to invite him to sit.

The man at the desk, a retired general who oversaw their missions, was reading the report Robby had submitted that morning. Finally, he lifted his gaze, giving Robby his full attention.

"Why don't you have a seat?" He nodded toward the chair, his full head of white hair unflinching in response.

Colin Fletcher no longer wore a uniform, but the tailored suit still fit him like one. His broad chest filled out every crease. His frosty blue eyes sent a chill down the spine of anyone who didn't know him, but although he was a man serious in nature, Robby had never known him to be unfair. Fletcher cared about his team and made sure they were well looked after.

Robby sat. "Sir, before you say anything —"

"How do you know what I'm going to say? You're expecting me to repeat our last conversation?"

"I am." Robby liked to see his missions through to the end, but there were times when his boss didn't agree. Their contact in Burma had been pleased with what they'd accomplished and had made a promise to look after the boys they'd found, but Robby didn't feel like this was over. Not when they had a lead on an American business that might be involved.

Fletcher ran his fingers along the edge of the desk, considering his words. "Last time you didn't have this much incriminating evidence."

"Then you agree with my assessment?"

“I agree that there is more going on that warrants our attention.”

“Great.”

“But.”

“There’s a ‘but’.”

“The Burmese government requested our participation specifically on the matter of this school, and we accomplished our goal. But this,” he lifted the report. “This isn’t just about a militia in Burma anymore. This is on American soil. My home turf.”

“Yes, sir. I agree.”

“The rules are different here.”

“I understand.”

“I need you to be discreet.”

“Of course.”

Fletcher sighed.

“Sir.” Something was bothering his boss, and he was afraid he already knew what it was. “You may as well say what’s on your mind.”

“Holland mentioned your reaction the other night.”

Robby paled. He and his men weren’t perfect, even with a high expectation on their outcomes. But they never let each other down. “He put that in the report?”

“Of course not. But he was concerned enough that he had a private word with me.”

“I see. And I can explain.”

“There’s no need. I know what’s in your file. I hesitated to schedule the mission on that day for that very reason.”

“It will never happen again. You have my word.”

“That’s not my primary concern. You and your men did a great job over there. All this proves is that you are capable of a successful mission despite the grief you carry from your past. I would be more concerned if you showed nothing. I know you and your brother were close, and that can’t be easy to carry around with you.”

“We weren’t that close at the end.”

“Still...if you need to talk about it, my door is always open. And I want to make sure you can carry the burden while you continue to work. I take it this won’t affect the completion of the tasks you’ll be carrying out?”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“I can see by your straight back that you’d prefer to change the subject.”

“If that’s possible, yes, I’d appreciate it.”

“Very well. Where do you suggest we begin?”

“I’d like to have a closer look at TreadCraft Dynamics.”

“You’ve seen the report we compiled on them?”

“I did. I’ve asked the team to look deeper into a few of the staff and see if anything pops.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’ll head to Pittsburgh and get a feel for the place. I’ll have a look around and keep an eye on things. Watch for any suspicious movement.”

“Are you looking for anything specific?”

“Not yet.”

“So, you won’t need a team to support you?”

“Not at this time, but I’ll keep them on speed dial.”

“Good, I’ve got another assignment coming up that needs attention, but I’ll make sure they’re available for you if you need them.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’d appreciate it if you keep me updated regularly.”

“Of course.”

“Excellent. You’re dismissed.”



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## Chapter 4

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ROBBY unbuttoned his heavy coat when he reached the steps of the TreadCraft building. It was an imposing design, but he wasn't impressed. Remaining neutral on a mission like this was imperative. And because he had no evidence to support the company's direct involvement in supplying munitions to Burma, he couldn't say that the animosity he felt toward the company was warranted. Maybe it was the fact that he believed, even if not directly at fault, a company of this size couldn't be completely innocent.

His missions meant he had direct knowledge of the lengths organizations would go for money and power, and TreadCraft would be no different. But as far as Burma was concerned, it was more likely that a small group within the company was taking advantage of a loophole. Possibly, someone directly involved with the fundraising arm of the company was looking to make a profit. But greed wasn't the only reason people did harm to others. Robby couldn't rule out the prospect that hate was a very strong motivator as well. Whether it was fed by fear or anger, not everyone involved could be after the same thing. If he could find a chink in the armor, maybe he could find a way

in to get to the root so he could pull it out.

He slowed his gait when he entered, taking in the surroundings before veering toward the displays he'd expected to see. TreadCraft's website made a big deal about visiting their lobby while in Pittsburgh. Schools would come for tours to learn about the products the company made as well as their philanthropic endeavors, inspiring the next generation.

The displays were a high-tech affair with videos that started when you stood in front of them. He walked slowly, taking the time to see the face the company presented to the public. By the time he reached the end, he was greeted by a prerecording of a child they had helped. A smiling face speaking broken English thanked TreadCraft for giving him the chance for a future.

The next screen allowed you to do a walkthrough of a village school. He tapped the area of the yard at the front of the school, and a short video played of kids kicking a soccer ball around. Next, he tapped on the school, and his jaw tightened as the camera moved smoothly through rooms that looked very similar to the graffiti-covered ones that he had stood in a short time ago. The corner of his mouth lifted in a cynical grin as he imagined those images displayed here instead of the joyful child, as unsuspecting guests were invited to see what was really happening with the money they generously donated.

He turned from the screen as it continued to play, taking the viewer through a typical school day.

Maybe some of it was real, but Robby was here to make sure that the smiling kids were the only ones to be found in Burma. No more children used as shields or anything else to further the rebels' cause. He wouldn't stop until he'd exposed the truth and given these children a real future.

As he wandered toward a seating area, he took note of the security. Access to the elevators was only granted to those with a pass, and a guard was there to make sure protocols were followed. With all the innovation TreadCraft was responsible for, corporate espionage would be a significant threat here. Some of the research going on in the upper levels would be well-guarded secrets worth possibly billions of dollars.

Scanning the ceiling, he found that the cameras were hard to spot. They'd been well hidden behind design elements. You'd have no idea they were there if you didn't know what to look for.

None of those observations mattered much as they were only useful when breaking in to a facility, and Fletcher would be against any kind of forceful entry without a warrant in place with either the local police or the FBI being

called in. It would take a truck load of evidence to get a warrant to enter TreadCraft.

“Can I help you, sir?” said a short woman standing behind the concierge’s desk. Her tailored suit swished as she stepped up to greet him.

“I’m waiting for a friend, actually. But thanks for checking, Kris,” he said, making note of her name badge.

“I would have approached you earlier, but you looked to be enjoying the displays, and I didn’t want to interrupt.” She smiled proudly.

“They’re really something. TreadCraft has quite a portfolio both with its products and its generosity.” He glanced back at the large TV that had reset itself. “It’s hard to believe there’s so much need in the world. It’s easy to take for granted everything we have.”

“TreadCraft Dynamics is a truly inspiring company.”

“Yeah. I bet. It would be a company you can feel good about working for, I guess.”

“Definitely. I was lucky to get this job.”

“I’d say you deserved it. You do a great job. Uh, is it okay for me to sit over there while I wait?”

“Yes, of course. Make yourself at home. If you let me know who it is you’re waiting for, I can call up to let them know you’re here.”

“I already sent a text. He’ll be down shortly.”

“Excellent. Then all that’s left for me to do is offer you a tea or coffee.”

“You really know how to look after people here. Thank you, but I’m fine.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. I’m right over there.”

“Thanks. I will.”

He sat on a gray modular sofa and continued his examination of the room. From the aerial surveillance footage he’d acquired, he knew the building had a loading bay of some kind at the back. It would offer a more suitable entry point if he ever got permission to breach, which he knew he wouldn’t. For now, he’d stick to his original plan and gather as much intel as he could without making any waves or drawing attention.

Kris moved in on another guest as Robby stood. He’d gotten enough from this vantage point, and he still had other angles he needed to consider. They would give him the opportunity to put in more time and effort.

“Everything okay?” Kris said, excusing herself from the current prospect.

“Yeah, fine. My friend had to cancel. Said he got a phone call right after

my text. Don't know what it was, but it was more important than our coffee."

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, sir."

"Don't worry about it."

"I hope you have a great day."

"Thank you. You made my wait more bearable."

"My pleasure. I trust you'll have a very nice afternoon."

"I'm sure." Nice wasn't the word for it. Laborious was more like it. He'd organized access to an office in a neighboring building that had a direct line of sight to the loading bay where he planned to do a stakeout and see what kind of traffic went in and out from there. He had a couple of people back at his office combing through everything that could be found on TreadCraft. He'd send the photos and any other data he could collect to add to the picture they were putting together. If he was lucky, he'd get an early lead and find a way forward. But more often, it took months.

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Hannah turned the light off in her office, then looked at her watch as she stepped out into the bullpen. She'd made herself a promise this year not to work too late. It was easy to get caught up in the job, but God had had several words with her about rest, and she was committed to leaving work on time most days. But today was different.

It wasn't hard to find work to keep her at her desk until the staff had dwindled, but her mind constantly wandered to the weather report. Half of the day she spent hoping it would change and let her get out of her commitment, but in the end, even though November had begun on the mild side, that had quickly changed with record low temperatures forecasted beginning tonight, and her conscience wouldn't allow her to keep putting off Sal when she felt certain his life would be at risk.

As she rounded the last desk, she saw the light was on in Pike's office and winced. If he knew she was there working late, he would find it strange if she didn't say goodnight. She checked her watch again before heading to his office.

"You're here late," Pike said when she leaned on his door frame to appear casual, even though her stomach was flipping at the thought of what she was about to do.

“I was finishing up a report. Didn’t want to leave it until morning when I was so close.”

“It’s eight o’clock. You couldn’t have been that close.”

“It took longer than expected. Do you usually work this late?”

“Yeah, I’m one of those workaholics. You’re not working extra hard to make up for that meeting, are you? I’d hate to see you fall into the trap.”

“No. I made a commitment to myself to get home at a reasonable hour most nights.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ve been meaning to ask you how you’re doing. You’ve had some time to cool down now.”

“I’ll be fine. I think what you said was right.”

“Oh wonderful. Which part?”

“I’ll bide my time until I’m in a position with more power.”

He sighed. “I had hoped it would steer you more in the direction of looking after your own career. Why not seek a higher position for yourself just for the sake of it? You’re the only woman I know who thinks so much of others and so little of herself.”

“Maybe you need to get some different friends.”

He laughed. “I’d tell you to focus on your job and forget about Burma if I thought it would make a difference.”

“It won’t.”

“I know. That’s why I didn’t say it.”

“You kind of did.”

“But seriously, Hannah, it’s okay to focus on yourself once in a while.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. If there’s one thing mankind does not lack, it’s a propensity to think of ourselves before anyone else.”

“Then tell me, what is it that you want?”

“Exactly what I outlined in my presentation.”

“No. I mean for you. As far as I know, you’re single. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Not right now.”

“Do you want to get married someday and have a family?”

“Sure, if the right guy came along.”

“I have a feeling you harbor very high standards.”

“I do. My parents gave me high standards.”

“Your dad died when you were young, right?”

She crossed her arms. “Yes.” Pike didn’t often shy away from telling her what he thought.

“Seeing your parents’ marriage through the eyes of a child would be very different from reality.”

“Is there a point that you’re getting to?”

“I just think it might be good for you to lower your standards once in a while.”

“Once in a while?”

“You’re a beautiful woman. There must be guys lining up to take you out. They don’t need to be your future husband, but you deserve a little fun now and then.”

“Why are you so interested in my love life all of the sudden?”

“Because I’m worried about you. You’ve had your head down, plowing through work, and so focused on the fundraising efforts of this company. You need to have a break.”

“I’m fine.”

“Oh yeah? Got any plans for the rest of your evening?”

“You mean besides going home and heating up some leftovers?”

“Thank you. You made my point. Please let there be something else. Please.”

“There’s not.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I don’t mind it at all.”

“I’m sorry, Hannah, but I can’t leave you to this devastating fate. I’m almost done here. Let me take you to dinner.”

“Uh.” That caught her off guard. Pike had often bordered on flirting with her, but he’d never crossed the line and certainly never asked her on a date. She was flattered in a small way. He was an attractive man, but his character outside of the office left much to be desired. And that was by Pike’s own admission.

“I wasn’t asking you out on a date. Just dinner with a coworker.”

“I know.”

He laughed. “You should tell that to your face.”

“Sorry, your invitation was unexpected, but appreciated. But I’m tired and was looking forward to a night in. Maybe another time.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

She suppressed a groan. That's what she got for trying to be polite instead of being clear and saying no. "Goodnight."

Her hand flipped in a lazy wave as she casually turned from the door, but once she was out of sight, she hurried to the elevator, pressing the button several times before clasping her hands in front of her and wringing her fingers.

Her heart pounded as she entered the elevator, checking her watch once more. She was going to be late, but Sal would have to take what he could get. When she'd first made the offer, even though it had been impulsive, she'd been glad she made it, but now that it had settled on her, she wasn't so sure. She could lose her job for this or probably worse. But she trusted Sal, and she couldn't find anyway to excuse herself for letting him freeze to death.

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## Chapter 5

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THE FAMILIAR CLIP of Hannah's heels on the concrete floor became a startling echo as she hurried through the empty hall. She checked behind her shoulder and picked up the pace.

"This is the right thing to do," she whispered, the words barely audible in the quiet corridor. But even though she'd prayed about it, she still wasn't sure if God was with her in this or not. She could soothe her conscience by believing that a company that helps children in other countries would want to help those in crisis in their own, but it wouldn't be the first time she'd made an extravagant gesture that turned out to be a mistake.

She had considered letting him stay at her house but couldn't get comfortable with the idea, and she had no friends close enough that she could ask for a favor this big.

But it was too late to change her mind now. Sal was waiting, and she'd made a commitment. No one would get hurt. The only outcome was someone would get a little help, and no one would know but the two of them.

She shoved open the heavy door and looked up the alley.



A man in an oversized coat pushed off the wall and walked over. "I was wondering if you would come."

"You thought I would abandon you?"

"You wouldn't be the first."

"I know I'm late, but I got caught up in the office. And you should know I don't go back on a promise."

"Sometimes you think you know a person."

"Maybe, but I'm a woman of my word, and I've done everything I can to help you. I'm risking a lot for you tonight, so don't lay a heavy guilt trip on me."

His shoulders dropped. "I know. Sorry. This cold makes my bones ache, and that makes me irritable. You know I'd go to a shelter if they had any room."

"I know. Come in and warm up. But don't forget, this is a trial. This needs to work for both of us. I can't promise I can let you stay beyond tonight. We'll see how things go."

He put a hand on her arm. The cold from his fingers seeping through her silk blouse. "Hannah. I want you to know that I really am grateful. I understand what you're putting on the line for me."

"Yeah, well, it's worth it. I may be risking my job, but if you sleep out on the street, you're risking your life."

"Thank you."

"As long as you haven't forgotten the other part of our deal."

"I'll look for a job this week."

"Good."

"But I'll have you know, it's not easy."

"Does that mean you've already started looking?"

"Not exactly. I've been busy."

"With what?"

"Living on the street is hard work, you know. It's not like I'm sitting around doing nothing."

She sighed. "Get in here, I'm freezing."

---

Robby leaned forward in his chair, adjusting his telephoto lens to focus in on

the woman who'd opened the back door of the loading bay.

He took a couple of snaps of her face, then watched as another man approached. Heavy set. His shoulders curved forward, but he didn't turn, so Robby couldn't get a picture of his face.

After a brief conversation with the woman, the man grabbed the woman's arm, but she didn't look concerned or pull away. Then they went inside.

Robby pulled the laptop closer, uploaded the images from the camera, then brought up the clearest one of the woman before scrolling through a list of TreadCraft employees.

"There you are. Hannah Reynolds. Project manager. Employed for just over two years. What are you doing letting strangers in the back door at this time of night?"

He did a search on various digital platforms and found what he thought was her profile on Facebook, but the picture was a woman standing with her back to the camera in front of the ocean, so he had to scroll through the few images she'd added to the account.

He found her laughing with a group of people who looked to be Southeast Asian, but the photo had to be over ten years old. Hannah looked a lot younger than in her TreadCraft photo.

He stared at the others in the picture. They could be Burmese, but the chances that he'd stumbled across the one person he was looking for were slim. Still, she was his first lead.

After twenty minutes of continuing his social media hunt, he gave up. Her internet presence was limited. Unusual for a woman in her late twenties.

His next search led to the internal newsletters TreadCraft published. He found one mention of her involvement in last year's fundraiser.

"Limited social media presence and an interest in your company's fundraising efforts. Interesting mix, Miss Reynolds. Let's see what else we can find."

He changed to another site. This one was part of his work with Fletcher and gave him access to highly secure information so he could dig deeper into her past. Everything that he had found spoke to a secret lurking in her past.

He got a hit.

"Bingo." He read through the information, then brought up the newspaper article mentioned. After reading the headline, he leaned back in his chair, scrubbing a hand across his mouth.

*American Missionary Killed by Child Soldiers*

“It’s never this easy.” He read the full article that gave details of the murder of a man who appeared to be Hannah’s father. As a girl, she had watched him be murdered by the very people he was trying to save. The article said she’d been hiding when it happened but witnessed the whole event.

Some people took their pain and used it for good. But not everyone. If the heartache was too much, a person could break and spend their whole lives seeking revenge. He’d seen it before.

Pushing his laptop aside, he called Fletcher. “Hey boss, I found something.”

“Where are you?”

“Staking out TreadCraft.”

“You found something already?”

“I observed a woman at the loading dock about an hour ago. She let a man in.”

“A man?”

“He kept his back to me the whole time, so I didn’t get a look at him before he entered. But I did see who the employee was.”

“And you believe it’s related to your case.”

“I do. Everything about it was suspicious. There was no delivery, and she looked around to make sure no one was there. Whoever that man was, he wasn’t supposed to be there.”

“There’s no way to know that for sure.”

“No, but I’ve been looking into the woman. Her name’s Hannah Reynolds. She’s a research manager.”

“Okay, then I suggest you turn the information over to TreadCraft immediately and let them deal with it.”

“Even if it’s connected to our case?”

“Robby, you know as well as I do that you haven’t got much.”

“She has connections to Burma.”

“Outside of the company?”

“Yeah.”

“Still.”

“It’s a big one. From what I read, her family lived over there as Christian missionaries for years.”

“And that would make her want to support these rebels because...”

“Her dad’s primary work was helping kids. He got caught up in some

kind of dispute, and he was tragically murdered by them.”

“He was killed by kids?”

“Child soldiers.”

“I see. So you think Hannah is out for revenge?”

“Possibly.”

“This is a thin thread.”

“She has connections to TreadCraft’s fundraising efforts as well.”

“Okay. Let’s assume for a moment—and I emphasize the word ‘assume’—that she is involved. There would have to be some amount of psychosis driving her.”

“I agree.”

“Which means she’s most likely not doing this alone. Not something this big.”

“Exactly what I was thinking. If this is emotional for her, then there could be someone who’s manipulating her into working with them.”

“Still, helping a militia to hurt kids...this is a real stretch for a girl who grew up over there.”

“Having your dad die like that at a young age can wreak havoc on a kid’s psychology. And whoever that guy is she let in—I’d bet he’s involved somehow. Maybe he’s a computer guy and can get into the funds and move them around? I don’t know. But I’d like to find out. I’ve been noting the security in the building.”

“No. I won’t authorize you to break in when we have so little to go on.”

“Sir, this could be big. I could go in there now and find out what’s going on.”

“No way. That is not happening. Until we know for sure, we’re keeping our noses clean. I’m giving you the green light to investigate Hannah further or this guy she let in, but that’s all. Keep an eye on the back door, see if you can get a look at this guy when he leaves.”

“I understand.”

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Sal followed Hannah down a short hall and into a large closet.

“Here we are,” she said. “Home sweet home. There’s not much space, but you’ll have room to lie down. And I brought in some painting drop cloths for

you. Not as soft as a blanket, but you can leave them here when you go. No one will take any notice.”

“You’ve thought of everything.”

“I’m sorry I can’t offer you something better.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can sleep anywhere. I’ll be cozy in here, and that’s all I need.”

“I’ve got an alarm clock here on the shelf. I’ve already set it. You need to be out of here before five. You should be safe in here until then, but —”

“I know. If I get caught, that’s on me.”

“This is a secure facility. It would be really bad for you if anyone found you. I mean, really bad.”

“But you can waltz down here and open the back door and let me in? Doesn’t seem very secure to me.”

“Yeah, well, you’re lucky I have high clearance throughout the building, and this isn’t the most secure area. We take deliveries in the back way, but the internal door from here has a specialized system. There are guards on the other side.”

“You afraid I’ll try to raid the place?”

“No, but you asked. So I’m telling you.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll take the consequences I have to face, but I would never throw you under the bus. Not after you’ve done so much to help.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t get arrested for trespassing, so make sure you follow my instructions.”

“The police station is warm too, you know.”

“Don’t say that. That’s the last place you need to be. If you get a record, it will be that much harder for you to get a job. And I told you, I’ve got contacts who may be able to get you work if you can’t find anything.”

“And I told you, I can do it on my own.”

“It’s okay to accept help now and then.”

“What do you call this?”

She frowned. “I forgot to get you dinner.”

“I don’t need dinner. I’ve already had something to eat.”

“Liar.”

He smiled. “I’ll be fine.”

She pulled a couple of fifties out of her wallet. “Promise me you’ll spend it on food and that’s all.”

He looked at her hand. "I can't take your money too."

"Yes, you can. I have a good job. I can afford to feed you a little."

"You're too good to me." He took the bills and stuffed them in his pocket.

"Remember. Food only."

"I haven't had a drink all week, I'll have you know."

"Have you been going to the AA meetings?"

His face fell. "I go when I can."

"Have you been to any?"

"I went to the first one, but it's so depressing. Those guys have serious problems."

Arguing with Sal was pointless. He didn't do well when pushed. It was part of the reason he found himself living on the street. But she'd known him when he had his life together, when he'd been a big part of raising money for her family at the local church. That was before he'd lost everything.

Sal settled himself on the floor, then looked up at her. "You don't have to hang around," he finally said when she didn't move. "I'll be comfortable."

She nodded, feeling a tightness in her chest at the unfairness of life. Sal had given so much, and this was where he'd ended up.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

---

It was four o'clock when Robby checked his watch. He squeezed his eyes shut and struggled to open them again. He'd been watching the door for hours with no luck. Hannah must have let the man out another way. That meant his next course of action was to get close to her.

He stretched, then sent a text to Fletcher.

No luck on the man, I'm going after Hannah. Her file says she's single. I'll see if I can get to her that way.

A minute later, he received a reply. Not a surprise. Fletcher wasn't much of a sleeper.

Until we've established a firmer connection between her and the militia, I want you to go gently. If she's clean, we don't need her heart torn to pieces again.

Thank you for thinking so highly of my skills.

Don't get a big head about it. And remember what I said.

I'll be a super nice guy. But only if that's her type.

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## Chapter 6

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HANNAH ENTERED the grocery store and stopped. Until that moment, she'd convinced herself to get a salad, but her brain hurt for multiple reasons.

Her anxiety about Sal had eased since he'd spent the last two nights sleeping safely. She'd checked both mornings and found the room tidier than when he'd arrived. He even went as far as folding the drop clothes before he left. It was a good sign that hopefully meant he was close to finding a way forward in life. It eased her stress about letting him stay since the cold nights were supposed to continue into the coming week.

Then there was the stress she felt about her position at work. She had to find a way to remind them that she wasn't a stone in their shoe. Pike hadn't helped matters as, earlier that day, he'd revisited her disaster of a meeting, making sure she focused on her priority of making herself invaluable to the company.

But what was bothering her the most was that she now doubted her ability to hear God's voice. Maybe this was all part of His plan, but it felt more like she'd badly misread His direction and couldn't trust herself to know what He



wanted from her.

So now, she needed something more substantial than veggies to ease her pain. Tonight was going to be all about comfort food. A premade lasagna and a pint of ice cream should do the trick.

But as she turned away from the produce section, she veered back. She could get a cucumber at the very least. And maybe a couple of apples as well so she was at least making an attempt to have some health in her diet.

After collecting the apples, she picked up a cucumber and gave it a squeeze. It was soft, so she searched for another as a man stepped up next to her. She shifted sideways to give him more room when he reached for a tomato.

“Is that normal?” he said.

She looked at him. “I’m sorry?”

He smiled at her, and she couldn’t help but smile back. He was cute. Very cute. But she wasn’t looking.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m talking to myself. I see people smell the produce all the time.” He sniffed his tomato. “I thought it would come naturally, but I’m not sure what it is I’m trying to decipher.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure it should smell like a tomato.”

“Really? That’s all we’re going for here? I thought it was like wine connoisseurs savoring the intricacies of the aroma.”

“Maybe some do, but I think if you know what a tomato is supposed to smell like, you’re ahead of the game.” She picked one up and smelled it for herself. “They don’t make them like they used to.”

“I have the distinct feeling you’re a closet expert. Please, Oh Wise One, provide to me your knowledge.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I don’t know that much.”

“I’m glad you laughed. I’m not usually a buffoon. It’s been a long day.”

“You too?”

“Seems to be going around.” He smelled another tomato. “So you think this one will do?”

“Well, the skin is red. Is the flesh soft to the touch?”

“So you *are* an expert!”

“Just the little things I’ve picked up here and there.”

“Do you mind?” He held it out to her. “I’m not sure what we’re going for.”

“You’re really that helpless?” She hadn’t intended on flirting with a

stranger tonight but found it lifted her spirits.

“I am. I really am.”

She tipped her head to the side but gave it a pinch while leaving it in his hand. “No, that’s too hard.” She checked several more in the pile before finding a good one. “Here. This one will do.”

He took it and compared the two. “Interesting. I can see what you mean. Thanks.”

“Not a problem. Enjoy.”

When she turned to go, he touched her arm to stop her. “Uh, I feel like I should thank you properly.”

“For helping you pick out a tomato?”

He twitched in embarrassment. It was surprisingly charming. “When you say it like that...but no. You may not believe me, but I don’t usually try to pick up strangers in the grocery store. However, I’ve just moved into town. I wouldn’t mind making a friend if you’d like to get a coffee or something? I’m Robby, by the way. I don’t think I said that.”

She bit her lip. It was tempting, but Pike was right when he said she had high standards. She also didn’t believe that he’d never picked up a girl in the grocery store. It sounded like the type of thing someone would say who did regularly. Or maybe she was overly cynical. It didn’t matter. It was pointless leading this guy on.

“I’m Hannah.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Look, you seem like a nice enough person —”

“Uh-oh.”

“But I’m not really in the market.”

“Not in the market for a friend?”

“That’s not why you’re asking me out.”

“Uh...no.” He scratched his cheek. “That is true. I do find you mildly attractive.”

“Mildly?” She feigned offense. She wouldn’t go out with him, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy herself.

“Well, I can’t just lead with ‘I spotted you the moment you walked in and had to meet you.’ That would be coming on too strong.”

“True.”

“You really won’t just have a coffee? I’m not looking for love. Just someone to have a conversation with.”

“Sorry. I’m gonna have to give it a pass. But there are plenty of nice women in the city. You’re charming and attractive. I’m sure you won’t have any trouble finding someone to have a coffee with.”

“Man, so you think I’m charming *and* attractive and you still won’t go out with me? Remind me again why you’re turning me down?”

“I told you, I’m not in the market.”

“And that’s that?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I think you might be the first woman to turn me down so decidedly.”

“So you *do* have experience dating from the produce section.”

“No. The tomato was the first, and I am buying it. That’s not to say I haven’t asked girls on dates before.”

“And you’ve never gotten turned down?”

“Only by Jenny Topper in eighth grade. Broke my heart.”

“Rejection is good for the soul. Trust me.”

“Since when?”

She laughed. “Have a good night, Robby.”

“You too, Hannah. But I’ll warn you. If I run into you again, I’ve got questions about watermelons.”

“Thump it. It should have a deep hollow sound.” She waved as she left him behind.

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Robby threw the tomato in the air, then caught it as he watched Hannah walk away. He could hear his team now when they heard the news that he’d failed in his attempt to connect with her. It was a first, but he hadn’t come out emptyhanded. She’d wanted to say yes to him, but it was clear she wasn’t a woman who opened herself up easily. That meant she wouldn’t take kindly if he pushed too hard. Unfortunately, that didn’t leave a lot of options for getting close to her without giving away what he was after.

He pulled out his phone as he left the store and called his boss.

“Robby, I was just thinking about you. How’s the dating game going?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but she turned me down.”

Fletcher snickered. “It’s about time. Good looks don’t always get you what you want.”

“I’m devastated.”

“Sure you are. So what’s next? You going to try again?”

“That’s why I’m calling. I get the feeling she’s not the type to be pursued. I think it would drive her away.”

“Is stalking ever a good option?”

“Some women like to be chased. I don’t think Hannah is one of them. I’ll need another way in.”

“Any bright ideas?”

“I don’t know. I was hoping you might have something.”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve gotten ahead of you on this one.”

“You had no faith in my abilities?”

“You said yourself you thought there might be some psychological issues with her. That couldn’t help her trust issues.”

“No. So, what are your thoughts?”

“I’ve had Green looking into it.”

“Sir, Green is a good soldier, but I don’t like his chances of getting close to Hannah. He doesn’t have the temperament for an assignment like that.”

“No kidding. That’s why I’ve had him looking into a new job for you.”

“Sir, please. This is one small setback. I’ll find a way in. You just have to give me time. It will be worth it.”

“Your new job is with TreadCraft.”

“You’re sending me in undercover?”

“If you don’t want to do it, I can send in one of the others.”

“Funny. But I didn’t think you wanted me going in.”

“I didn’t want you breaking and entering, but if you already have a security pass, you’re all set.”

“And if I’m discovered?”

“You mean in a highly secure facility under false pretenses?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t be. But if you are, I have some connections to smooth it over. My biggest concern right now is that TreadCraft is not directly involved in this Burma mess and we’re not forthcoming with information to protect them. It’s been days since you saw that guy enter. I don’t want to withhold that for much longer.”

“Then I’ll get in there and find out what’s going on.”

“Good. But I’m keeping you on a short leash. I shouldn’t have to tell you what is permissible.”

“No, sir.”

“And you only have until the end of next week.”

“What if that’s not enough time?”

“Make sure it is.”

“Yes, sir.”

“By the way, how are your typing skills?”

“Terrible. Why?”

“You better brush up.”

“What exactly is the position I’m stepping into?”

“It’s temp work. Something to do with data entry, I believe.”

“Sounds riveting. When do I start?”

“Day after tomorrow. And Robby, try not to be too terrible at your job.”

“If all else fails, I can make a decent coffee.”

“Hopefully that will be enough to impress Hannah. Green will be in touch.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Robby hung up the phone and tossed it on the passenger seat when he got in his car. The opportunity to get inside TreadCraft was unexpected, but it would open up possibilities he hadn’t had before. It wasn’t only getting close to Hannah that was important. It was also seeing who she interacted with so he could figure out others who might be involved.

He slid down in his seat when Hannah came out of the store with a bag hanging off her arm. He watched her until she left the parking lot, then left himself. The others might not believe it, but trying to pick up a mark wasn’t how he preferred to operate. He did what was necessary for a job, but he didn’t like pretending to like someone. What he was good at pretending was that he was interested in working with them, and that was exactly what he could do with Hannah. Being on the inside of the same company meant he could approach her about her connection to Burma and make it clear he was interested in turning a profit and would do whatever was needed. Best-case scenario was she put him onto whoever it was pulling the strings.

He pulled to the side of the road a block away from her brick row house. He hadn’t meant to follow her home, but he wanted to see where she lived and see if it offered any more clues about the type of person she was. Anything would help, but there wasn’t much to see.

His phone dinged a message, and he saw that a new report had been emailed to him about further information they’d gathered from Burma.

Hannah would have to wait. Burma was his priority tonight.

He pulled back onto the street, and, once he had passed Hannah's place, he noticed another car parked on the side of the road half a block farther along. A figure was visible in the driver's seat, his face lit up from the glow off his phone. It was a man. Probably Caucasian and somewhere around his forties or fifties. He was most likely waiting for someone in a house nearby. No one on a stakeout would allow themselves to be exposed by the light from their phone, and he didn't have the build to match the man Robby had seen enter with Hannah the other day.

He pushed the details from his mind. He had enough to go on without adding extra scenarios to the pot.

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## Chapter 7

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ROBBY PULLED off his coat and draped it over his arm as he approached the same concierge he'd spoken to the last time he was there.

"Good morning, sir."

"Morning. It's nice to see you again, Kris."

"I thought you looked familiar. The guy whose friend stood him up, right?"

"Good memory."

"It helps with the job."

"I bet. So many people coming and going, it would make a difference to them knowing they're noticed."

"And making a difference in people's lives is what we like to do here."

"Well said."

"You visiting to see the same person as before? I can go up there and drag him down if you need me to."

Robby laughed. "No, today is my first day on the job."

"Oh. I hope it wasn't an interview you got stood up for?"

“No, actually—” He gave her a mischievous grin before leaning in conspiratorially. “I wasn’t exactly truthful the other day, I’m afraid.”

Kris frowned.

“I was here scoping out the place, not to visit a friend. I made that story up so I wouldn’t look suspicious.”

“Sure makes you look suspicious now, though.”

“Good point. I’d been offered the job but wasn’t sure yet and didn’t feel comfortable telling anyone yet.”

“I wish you would have.”

“Would it have made that much of a difference?”

“Are you kidding? If I knew why you were here, I would have showed you around.”

“Really?”

“Sure. That’s my job.”

“I guess I missed my chance.”

“Not at all. I can still give you a quick tour if you like.”

“I would love that, but I don’t want to be late on my first day. I was told to speak to Titus in security about organizing my ID.”

“No problem. I’ll call him for you. What was your name?”

“Robert Moore.”

“Sure thing, Robert.”

“Please, call me Robby. Only my mom calls me Robert. And only when I’m in trouble.”

“Robby.” She winked, then pulled a walkie talkie from her hip. “Titus, I’ve got one Robert Moore here with me. Says he’s a new employee who needs to speak to you regarding his work ID, but I think he’s trouble.”

She grinned as a crackly voice came through. “I’m sure you can keep him in line until I arrive. I’ll be there in five.”

“Roger that.”

“Trouble, huh?” Robby said.

“Can’t be too careful.”

“I like your style, Kris. I like to see people having fun with their jobs.”

“Makes the day go faster, but you have to be savvy about who’s prepared for a joke and who’s not. Not everyone has a sense of humor.”

“That is true. Should I sit over there while I wait?”

“Go wherever you like. Normally, I encourage people to visit the displays, but I remember you’ve already had a look.”



“Yeah. I’ll wait on the couch.”

He made himself comfortable and watched as more employees arrived for the day. When Hannah entered, he leaned forward, watching her as she scanned her card and smiled at the guard, then disappeared.

She’d likely be suspicious when he turned up in her office, but he could easily bluff his way through that. Unfortunately, Fletcher hadn’t given him much time to win her over. He’d have to move quickly and make his interest in her extracurricular activities known before too long.

His eyes continued to rove from face to face until they landed on a bulky, olive-skinned man who entered the lobby through a side door and headed toward the concierge before being directed his way.

Robby stood as the large man bulldozed his way over. If it wasn’t for the smile on Titus’s face, Robby would have prepared for a fight.

“Hi there, Robby. I’m Titus.”

When they shook, each man tested the strength of the other until Titus relented, slapping Robby on the arm before releasing his grip.

“I like you already. You can always take the measure of a man by his grip.”

“I agree. I’m glad to know the security of this company is in capable hands.”

Titus looked him up and down curiously. “You’re not the usual business type we get in here.”

“Oh yeah? And what type do you usually get?”

“For a data entry clerk? I don’t mean any disrespect, but usually women. Although a few of them have had pretty firm handshakes.”

“Didn’t know I had such stiff competition. But my typing skills are second to none.”

“Is that so? What other skills do you have? Because you look more suited to a job beside me.”

“Data analysis is actually where I perform best, believe it or not.”

“Data analysis, huh?”

“Sitting at a desk so long, though, I like to keep fit in my spare time.”

“No kidding. You do much boxing?”

“I know my way around the ring, yeah. Why?”

“There’s a gym down town that a friend of mine owns. You should come by some time.”

“I thought you held yourself like a boxer. Thanks for the invite.”

Titus checked his watch. “We should get started. They’ll want you upstairs shortly.”

“I’m ready when you are.”

“Great. Follow me. I have a couple of forms I need you to fill out, and then I’ll take your picture for your ID, which I will have ready for you on your way out this afternoon. All you have to do is see whatever guard is on the desk, and he’ll have it ready for you.”

“Sounds good. Hey, uh, can you give me an idea of who I’ll be working with upstairs?”

“Once I’ve had my fun with you, I’ll pass you on to Wilma. She’s in charge of all the temps in the office.”

“Anything I need to know about her?”

“She’s a sweet lady, but don’t cross her. Also, she likes Licorice Allsorts. If you do get on her bad side, you know what to do.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

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Hannah’s head was pounding. Again. She didn’t usually suffer from so many headaches, but this week, they’d persisted, and she knew why. Lack of sleep from her stress and too much coffee coupled with not enough water. It was her own fault. She should be looking after herself better.

She stretched her neck as she dug into her purse for some painkillers, washing them down with the rest of her coffee before looking into her empty cup.

“One more cup and then I promise I’ll drink water.” She pushed back her chair, blinking away fatigue as she walked the familiar path through the bullpen toward the coffee machine in the kitchen.

Zigzagging through the last row, she stopped when she heard her name.

“Hannah.” Pike was standing in his office door.

“Yeah?”

“Got a sec?”

She swiveled and headed his way after a deep sigh.

He waited at his door until she reached him. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No, sorry. It’s not you. I had a rough night last night. And the night

before.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Nope. Just my mind going in a million directions, as it does sometimes.”

He put his hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle massage as he steered her into his office.

“You should have told me you were stressed. I could have taken you out. You still owe me that dinner, and you need a break.”

She sat in the chair to get out of his grasp. “I’m fine. It’s nothing I can’t handle. So, what is it I can do for you today?”

“I was going to tell you to have a seat, but you’ve beat me to it.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“Not ominous, but it is important. At least I know it will be to you.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I thought you might like to know, I heard this morning that the board has approved another fundraiser for Burma.”

“But?”

He raised his eyebrows. “But nothing. I thought you’d be excited.”

“I am.”

“Are you?”

“Okay, maybe not excited, but that is good news.”

“Then why do you look disappointed?”

“I’m not. I just...I was excited about working here originally because of all the good that I thought TreadCraft was doing. I wanted to be a part of that.”

“You don’t have to be running the fundraiser to be a part of it.”

“How can I have an impact on it if I’m not a part of it?”

“Why are the company’s efforts never good enough for you?”

“It’s a nice sentiment, but it’s all about window dressing for them. If I thought they actually cared...I don’t know. Don’t listen to me. Forget I said anything.”

“No wonder you’re exhausting yourself. You set your expectations way too high for a company like this. You have to temper yourself. They carry a lot of responsibility for a lot of people, including shareholders who expect a good profit. TreadCraft can’t afford to look at the world the way you do. But that’s why we need someone like you here to keep championing these things. Just don’t push too hard.”

She hated that what he said made sense. “I know. I shouldn’t let myself

get disappointed. I think I lost some steam after how badly that meeting went.”

“It didn’t go that bad.”

“I ran into Marty in the lobby a couple of days ago. She barely said two words to me.”

“Don’t worry about her. You’re doing a great job here. And promise me you’ll never change.”

“I thought you didn’t like how hard I was pushing.”

“Yeah, well, maybe. But we need more Hannahs in the world. You provide the balance. Your morality is a breath of fresh air—but too much oxygen can make it hard to breathe.”

“Is that even true?”

“Yes, I looked it up.”

“So you’ve been preparing for this?”

“I’m your boss. I’m trying to look after you.”

“And where does your morality stand in all of this?” She was tired of him patronizing her.

“Me? I stay out of it. To each his own, I say. Life’s too short.”

“So you want me to keep fighting, but also lighten up.”

“No, I think you should stop fighting altogether. There are some battles worth giving your all for, and this is not one of them.”

“But you just said —”

“I said don’t lose that edge, but you don’t need to fight all the time. You can work together with them on this. Just follow their lead. Go where they go, and don’t stick your nose in too far.”

“And lighten up.”

He smiled. “Only once in a while. It wouldn’t hurt. Maybe come to this year’s Christmas party so we can see the other side of Hannah Reynolds.”

“Why would I be any different at a Christmas party?”

“Everyone is different. That’s what an open bar does to people.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Please tell me you’re joking. Everybody drinks.”

“No, they don’t.”

“Maybe they should.”

“Because alcohol has done such a great job solving the world’s problems?”

He held up his open palms in surrender. “All right. I’ll let it go. I’m not

trying to start a fight. I only wanted to tell you about the fundraiser to cheer you up. I've obviously failed in my endeavor."

"I'm sorry." She pressed her fingers into her forehead. "I'm being cranky. I might not drink, but I can take your advice and lighten up. I've been moody lately, and that's not like me. From now on—" She flashed him a bright smile and found it came easier than she'd expected. "I'll be more cheerful."

"Glad to hear it."

"And thank you for letting me know about the fundraiser."

"Any time."

"Now, I better get that coffee I was after because I've got a lot of work to do today."

"Stop by next time you need a breather."

"Thanks, I will." No, she wouldn't. Pike had never made her feel uncomfortable before, but something had changed recently. He was taking much more of an interest in her, and she didn't know whether it was her imagination or discernment. If she trusted herself to hear God properly, she'd have a better idea. The best she could do for now was keep to herself, something she was doing far too much of this week.

She passed by the last line of cubicles, then had to stop when a chair pushed backward into her path.

The man sitting in her way looked familiar, but she couldn't remember him being in the office before.

He smiled up at her, and she hugged the mug to her chest, unsure how to react to the flutter in her stomach.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi?"

He frowned. "Don't tell me you don't remember me. That's deflating."

"Sorry, you do look familiar, but I have no idea why."

"The tomato."

It took her a second to catch on. "Oh. Of course. I can't believe I didn't put it together. I didn't know you worked here. That is so embarrassing that I didn't recognize you at the store."

"No, don't be embarrassed. Today's my first day. I was in the lobby getting my ID sorted when you came in. I was surprised to see you there, but even more surprised when I discovered you work on this floor. Just my luck working in the same office as the only woman who's ever turned me down."

She blushed. "Don't forget Jenny what's-her-name."

“Jenny Topper. Great. You can barely remember me, but you remember the only other girl who threw my advances back in my face?”

“Sorry, that’s rough. It was Robby, right?”

“Thank goodness you remembered. I feel a little better.”

She looked in his cubicle at a picture of a dog. No family. Maybe that was why he was looking for a friend. “Uh...so what’s your job here?”

“Temping. I’m in between jobs at the moment and needed the extra cash. But I’ve always got something on the go, so I don’t expect to stay long. What do you do here?”

“Research manager.”

“You enjoy it?”

“Parts of it. I like that the company supports Burma more, though.”

His eyes flashed. “Really? I did read about that.”

“And you must have seen the displays.”

“Yeah. It’s pretty cool that they want to look after the places they import rubber from. Giving back is a nice thing to do, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“It’s very noble of them.”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“You don’t agree? Isn’t that why you said you’re here?”

She shrugged. “I have different ideas about what they should be doing over there, that’s all.”

“Like what?”

She didn’t expect the tightness in her throat from being asked about it but didn’t want to cry in front of a stranger. “Just different. That’s all.” When he didn’t move, she added. “If you’ll excuse me, I was getting a coffee.”

“Oh, sure.” He pulled back into his cubicle, and she hurried past.

On her way back to her office, she took a detour to avoid Robby, pushing thoughts of Burma from her mind.

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## Chapter 8

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ROBBY DRUMMED his fingers on the keyboard. His second encounter with Hannah hadn't gone exactly as he'd hoped, but her responses certainly helped to strengthen his suspicions. He'd seen her eyes tear up when he'd asked her about Burma. There was a lot of hurt there caused by TreadCraft's help. She didn't hide the fact that she wasn't happy about what they were doing over there, and while she didn't want to continue the conversation, she'd still been honest enough about it that he saw an opening to approach the subject again.

He looked between the two screens on his desk, stabbing at the keys with his index fingers. If he wasn't careful, TreadCraft would fire him for not doing his job before he was finished with the assignment, but this work was painful.

His eyes drifted from the screen to the dog picture Hannah had noticed. Barney—that was the name he'd given to the picture—was the type of dog he'd get if he could. But here, Barney was all for show. He found it made him more approachable. Being in the special forces meant he carried himself in a way that often intimidated people. A dog softened that look.

After entering a few more lines of data, he pulled out his phone and made a call. “Hey, Green. I’ve got a job for you.”

“A job for me? I thought I just got *you* one.”

“Yeah, and it’s terrible. I’m going to email you some data I need you to collate.”

“Do you even know what collate means?”

“It’s what Wilma said several times before showing me to my desk. I need to last out the week here, which means I need some help.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“I’m getting a lot of that lately. Can’t get a date and don’t know how to do my job. Will you do it or not?”

“If you get it to me within the hour. I have my own work to do, you know.”

“Thanks Green, you’re a peach.”

After sending the information, he did a search on a new chest rig Fletcher was looking into to pass some more time, then checked his watch. He judged he’d given his last interaction with Hannah enough time to have another chat with her and see if he could move things along to the next level.

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He knocked on the doorframe.

She looked up and lifted her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“I can’t help but feel like we got off on the wrong foot. I have a tendency to be overconfident. Usually it works, but you didn’t appear very impressed. I want you to know that I’m not as obnoxious as I seem.”

He was pleased to see her features soften. He was making some headway.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re fine. If you stick around long enough, you’ll probably learn I have strong feelings about Burma that have gotten me in hot water. None of us is perfect.”

He had been prepared to bring up the subject himself, but she beat him to it.

“No, but I’m feeling a little embarrassed.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a data entry clerk. An overqualified one.”

“You said you needed the work. There’s no shame in that.”



“You’re right. And I know I shouldn’t be too hard on myself. I’ve gotten back from several years overseas, and I’m trying to find my feet. I needed something low stress.” If her involvement in Burma was emotional, he needed her to know he would happily support anything dubious she was involved in. If she wanted to get back at them bad enough, she should be open to whatever she could get. “But I’m finding I miss the excitement.”

“Excitement, huh? So you weren’t hanging out in a London flat somewhere?”

“No, I was in the Middle East.”

“Oh. That is definitely a far cry from Pittsburgh. Were you over there because of the military?”

“No. Business. With all the turmoil, a lot of opportunities arose to make a lot of money.” He couldn’t read the look on her face, but it had changed.

“I see. And all that money that was to be made, you obviously didn’t make any of it.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because you’re temping for a job you’re overqualified for.”

“You see right through me. I got double-crossed. I should have known better. I could see my associate wasn’t as invested as I was. After all the work I did to make the deal...anyway. It’s hard to find good partners, you know what I mean?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Kind of.”

“When I agree to do something, I’m all in. You can’t always find that in people. If you’re passionate about something, you want to see it through to the end.”

“I can agree with you there.”

“So, Burma, huh? I bet there’s some interesting opportunities over there. I don’t suppose you know of any?”

“You mean besides building schools for poor kids?”

He huffed a laugh. “Yeah. You give so much to people, and things don’t always turn out the way you expect. I mean, I’m sure there are those who are grateful for what TreadCraft does, but there must be a lot more who take advantage of their generosity. That’s not right.”

“It’s true that some know how to work the system.”

“Makes you want to do something, though, doesn’t it? I guess that’s why I don’t have any problem taking advantage of a situation. If they deserve it, they deserve it.”

Her mouth screwed up as she fought for composure. Not the reaction he was expecting. “I’m not sure why you think I’d be a sympathetic ear to your using others’ misfortune for your gain, but I think you’ve misread the situation.”

He didn’t think so. She just needed to know that he wasn’t playing games. “Look, maybe I’m wrong, but you strike me as a shrewd woman. You specifically mentioned the company’s involvement over there and said you weren’t happy about the help they were doling out. I thought maybe there was an offer on the table.”

“There wasn’t.”

“Okay. Maybe you were feeling me out, but you don’t like others moving in on your turf.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Have you got something going, and you want to keep me out of the picture? I know people. I could be a benefit to you.”

“Okay, yeah, I’ve got something going on over there.”

“Great. I’d love to hear about it.”

“It’s called helping people. Or at least trying my best.”

She didn’t want to let him in. It made sense. She’d need to protect herself. Depending on what she was doing specifically, she could be headed to prison if she was found out. But if she was going to try to shake him off by pushing the moral high ground, he’d push back. It was time to change gears. It should move things along better, and hopefully she’d let something slip.

“So you really want to help kids in need?”

“Yes.”

“You think they deserve it?”

Her lips flattened, and she pulled a stack of papers in front of her like she was ready to get back to work. “I thought for a brief moment that you were a decent guy, but I was mistaken. I don’t know why you came into my office in the first place.”

“All I wanted to do was let you know I’m in.”

“You’re in? Look, I don’t have time for this. Whatever you’re involved in, I want no part in it. And just so you know, if you incriminate yourself, I’ll call the police.”

“That would not be worth your while.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because everyone has a price. It may not be financial. But everyone has

something they're desperate for."

"Not me. I've got everything I need."

"Oh yeah? Everything? You've got a nice house and a fast car?"

"Like you said, not everyone is looking for monetary gain."

"Then what is it you have that's so wonderful?"

She lifted her chin. "Jesus."

That pulled him up. "Jesus? Are you serious?" He almost laughed. He should have.

"Yeah."

"As in..."

"As in, I'm a Bible-believing Christian. And that's all I need."

"I can't tell whether you're serious or you're trying to get rid of me."

"Both."

This conversation had taken a turn he'd never seen coming, and he wasn't quite sure where to go from here. She'd been a child on the mission field, so it was possible that she had some warped sense of godliness wrapped up with her need for revenge. Maybe he could pull it out of her.

"I've known a few terrible Christians in my time," he said, crossing his arms.

"So have I."

"You don't think you're one of them?"

"I'm not perfect."

"But you see yourself as without sin."

"Only because of Jesus."

"So anything that you do is fair game?"

"I never said that."

"Surely you've seen the mess the world is in. How can you be a God-fearing Christian with things the way they are?"

"The world is broken."

"Yes, it is." Then he saw the way forward with her. "And sometimes, to fix the broken, you have to cross a few lines. When we see injustice, we need to be God's tool to fix it. Am I right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Right and wrong. Who gets to decide?"

"What?"

"Morality. Where does it come from? Who decides what is okay and what is not?"

“God.”

“So if someone does evil and God leads you to take action, you have to do it?”

“Yes.”

“No matter what the cost?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Okay. I’d say that’s some common ground for us.”

“You believe in God?” she said skeptically.

“Not God, no. But I’ve seen evil in the world, and I agree that there are times when action is required that rises above the law.”

“I don’t think we’re saying the same thing.”

“Why? Because you hide your actions behind the will of some god? If someone murdered a member of your family, you don’t believe that they should be killed in response?”

“I’ve got work to do. And so do you.”

He’d gotten under her skin. He needed to seal it, but it would mean exposing himself. But he needed her to understand that he’d do whatever was required and that he understood the pain she bore.

“I lost my brother when we were teenagers.”

“I’m sorry.” She wouldn’t look at him.

“There’s nothing you have to be sorry about. He took his own life. But if someone else had done it, there is no doubt in my mind that I’d hunt them down. You can’t let people get away with that.”

“This conversation has gotten a little intense for me. You’ve made me uncomfortable.”

“Good. We need to be uncomfortable sometimes. It’s what pushes us to act.”

“You’re right.” She stood. “If you don’t leave my office now, I’ll call security.”

“Have it your way. But don’t forget what I said. I know pain, and I know how to ease it. And you know where to find me. If you need help with anything, I’m flexible.”

He went back to his desk. That should do it one way or the other. She’d either take the bait or be so rattled that she’d have to meet with whoever it was she was working with. All he had to do now was watch and wait.

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## Chapter 9

---

SAL PUSHED PAST HANNAH, ruffling his coat to cast off the snow as he entered the building. Before he could make any headway, she put a hand on his chest.

“Hang on a second.” He wouldn’t look at her, so she stepped in front of him. “Sal.”

“What?” He kept his eyes on the floor.

“Have you been drinking?”

He moved past her. “Come on, Hannah. Give me a break.”

“Don’t do that to me. Don’t make me the bad guy here. We had a deal.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know what I have to put up with every day. You’ve got a nice house and a good job. On the street, it’s—My mind. It just—It goes crazy on me, and the only way I can settle it down —”

“Hey, I know this isn’t easy for you. I don’t expect you to be perfect, but I do expect you to make an effort.”

“I *am* trying. This is the first drink I’ve had all week.”

“I told you I could get you into a program.”

“And I told you I don’t do programs.”

“Even if they can help you? These are good people who have the skills you need. They know what you’re going through.”

He looked at her and took an aggressive step closer. “How can anyone know what I’m going through? You have no idea, Hannah. You stand there in your fancy clothes and judge me?” He crumpled, and his hands went to his face. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

“Hey, Sal. Come on. Don’t forget you have people who care about you.”

He shook his head. “You’re the only one. You’re the only person I can rely on. I’ve let so many people down, and they’ve all abandoned me.”

Hannah looked up at the ceiling and let out a slow breath. She’d known it would be hard to help him. *God, give me wisdom. I don’t want to enable his behavior, but he needs help. He needs your help. What more can I do?*

“Come on,” she said as she led him into the closet. “Promise me you won’t give up on yourself. You’re a good man underneath all that pain.”

“Do you really believe that’s true?”

“I wouldn’t be helping you if I didn’t. There was a time when you did a lot for my family. I’m simply repaying the favor.”

“Sometimes I want to give up, but then I remember your dad and how hard he fought to do what he did. He always inspired me. And I remember you and your mom when you came back home without him. And look at you now.”

“Yeah. Never forget that God is faithful no matter how bad things look.”

“I can do this. I know I can. I just need time.”

“I know. But will you make me one promise?”

“Anything.”

“Will you at least think about accepting help from someone besides me? There is only so much I can offer you. Sleeping in a closet at my work is only temporary, and it can only help you so much. Don’t be too proud to ask for help where you need it.”

“I shouldn’t need to ask for help. If I can’t do this on my own, what good am I as a man?”

“That has nothing to do with masculinity. I remember one night when I was about seven and my dad came home crying. I was supposed to be sleeping. I don’t know what happened exactly, just that something he’d put a lot of effort into had fallen apart. He told my mom he was a failure. He said he couldn’t see the point of staying because he was useless to everyone

around him.”

“You’re making this up.”

“I’m not. To the world, he appeared very capable. I was so proud of him when he’d stand up in front of a church and inspire the congregation with stories about what God was using us to do over there, but that wasn’t the whole truth. He struggled like any other man, but he had friends around him who could help him get back up and keep going. That’s all I’m saying you need. People around you who can help you keep going when you’re at your lowest. And—” This next part was a gamble. “Pray. God’s listening.”

He scoffed, but then nodded. “You’re probably the only one in the world who thinks the big fella upstairs has any interest in a burnout like me.”

“That’s not true, but I’m not going to change your mind tonight.”

“Smart woman.”

“Get some rest. Our problems always look worse at night. In the morning, the burden won’t be so heavy.”

He scrunched his mouth like he had something else he wanted to say.

“What is it?”

“You haven’t asked me about work.”

“Considering the alcohol, I guessed at the answer and didn’t want to bug you about it and make things worse.”

“That’s thoughtful of you and more than I deserve. I want you to know that I am looking, but that last one I couldn’t stomach. I don’t want to work in a place where I’m not respected.”

She held onto her sigh. “Good night, Sal.”

“Night.”

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*She chewed on her lip as she headed back up the hall. God, if I’ve gone about this all wrong, please show me the right way forward. I just want him to have a chance, but I can’t help but feel like I’m not doing him any good. I don’t want to just give him a place to sleep for the winter. I want to see him back to the man he used to be.*

She reached into her purse, scratching around for her car keys, but couldn’t find them.

“You have got to be kidding.”

She stopped and pulled her purse open, searching through the mess until she remembered dropping her pen under the bookshelf in her office. She'd used the light on her key ring to find it. Then left the keys on the shelf. At least the office was empty. The last thing she wanted right now was to talk to anyone else while she processed her latest encounter with Sal. At least things in the office were easier. Pike had backed off, and Robby had left her alone for the last couple of days.

A slim smile pushed at her lips as she wondered how she could ever have been attracted to Robby in the first place. Their first encounter could never have prepared her for when he finally showed his true colors. At least he was only a temp, so wouldn't be around for long.

The elevator opened on her floor to the dim lights that remained on at all times.

She skirted around the cubicles and flicked the light on as she entered her office. Then she froze.

Robby was bent over her desk drawer, his fingers half-lifting a file when his eyes met hers. He didn't even have the decency to look startled.

"This is awkward," he said, letting the file slide back into place before he closed the drawer. "I thought you were gone for the day."

"I was. I forgot my keys." She nodded toward the shelf where they were sitting. "What are you doing?" Her heart hammered in her chest as she pulled a small container from her purse. A bottle of pepper spray a friend had given her when she'd moved to Pittsburgh. The only reason she'd kept it was sentimental value. She'd never expected to have to threaten anyone with it. And even though she didn't expect Robby to do anything that would harm her, she liked the idea of showing him she couldn't be pushed around.

"I was looking for information."

"On what? Are you a corporate spy? I don't keep any valuable information in my office."

"Sure you don't."

"Anything important is kept locked up, and the only thing my team is working on right now is how to maintain tire pressure for longer. That won't do you or the people you're working for any good. Not to mention that all that research is in the lab, and your pass won't give you access." She waited a beat, then said, "and neither will mine."

He smiled. He knew she was bluffing. "I'm not looking for information on the company's research. I'm looking for what you're up to in Burma."



“Burma? Are you serious? What is your deal? TreadCraft builds schools and digs some wells.”

“Builds schools, huh?”

“Yeah. Did you not see the displays in the lobby? That’s the first thing they want people to look at. There’s no money to be made in Burma, if that’s what you’re after.”

“Plenty of people make money over there. That’s always the problem, isn’t it? The powerful take anything they want and leave the rest to suffer?”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Are you? You said TreadCraft builds schools. What do you do?”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“In Burma?”

“Yes.”

“Right now, nothing.”

It was impossible to work out exactly what he was after, but one thing was for sure, she wasn’t about to share her connection to that country. She wouldn’t share her heart with him. Her care for those people had been stomped on enough.

“You’re going to stick to that line?”

“It’s not a line. I have nothing to do with the fundraising efforts, and I’ve never been to Burma with the company.”

He shook his head. “Why are you being so difficult about this?”

“I’m the one being difficult? Maybe if you told me what it was you were after, I could help steer you in the right direction.”

“All I want is more information about the scam you’re running.”

She almost choked at his accusation, lifting her pepper spray while she took a moment to find her voice. “Scam? You think I’m running some kind of scam over there?”

“I’m convinced of it, and I want in. That’s all. I’m not here to step on your toes or cause you any harm. All I want is to help.”

He stepped around the desk, and she stepped back, threatening him with the spray. “That’s close enough. I’m calling security.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“You’re trespassing.”

“I understand you have no reason to trust me, but there’s a lot more I could have done by now, believe me. So I’ll tell you what, you keep the

details of the operation to yourself, but give me a job to do. Doesn't matter what it is. Or if you'd be more comfortable, I can talk to whoever else it is you're working with."

"You're crazy." She took two more steps back and reached for the phone on the nearby desk.

"Wait."

She lifted the receiver. "Why should I?"

"Because." He sighed. "Because you'll be arrested if you don't."

"I'm pretty sure you're the one who will be arrested."

"I didn't want to do it this way, but you leave me no choice. I'm not trying to get work in Burma. I'm part of a special operations team that works alongside the federal government. I'm in the middle of an investigation."

She almost laughed. "Investigating what?"

"You."

"You can't seriously believe I'd fall for that."

"It's the truth."

"Then you can tell it to security."

"Please. This assignment is covert, and, frankly, I don't trust you."

"Good. You shouldn't. I'm not on your side." She reached to dial the number for the guard.

"Put it down."

She looked at him, her finger frozen over the button. He was holding a gun.

"Put the phone down immediately."

The fear didn't hit her right away, but she felt feeble, holding nothing more than pepper spray. She hung up and lifted her hands. "Why do you have a gun?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want things to get this far. I was going to be in and out of your office. You wouldn't have known a thing about it."

She tried to pray, but looking down the barrel of the gun thwarted her attempts. "Please don't shoot."

"I won't. But I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me."

"You can have anything in my office you want. Just take whatever you want and go. "

"That's what I'm doing."

"But...why would you want to take me? I don't know anything. Tie me up or something. That way, you can get away without me interfering. The

cleaners won't find me for hours. I can't do anything to stop you."

"All you have to do is cooperate, and you won't get hurt."

"But I don't know anything. If you want information about Burma, you need to speak to—" She stopped when she realized all she could do was implicate someone else and put them in danger.

"Speak to who?"

"No one. There's a team who makes decisions on where the fundraising money gets allocated. I have nothing to do with it. I don't even get to go on any of the trips overseas. Why are you so interested in me?"

"Despite what you say, I don't believe you. I want answers, and I'm confident you have them. Let's go."

"Please."

"Now."

She turned slowly and walked toward the elevators. There was always a guard on duty in the lobby, but Robby had to know that. She stopped, and the gun pressed into her back.

"Move."

"You didn't...you haven't hurt anyone here?"

"No, why would I? That was the whole reason I came in here when everyone was gone."

"Will you promise not to hurt anyone?"

"That depends on you. You're hoping the guard in the lobby will come to your rescue?"

She winced. "At first. But he probably has a family. I don't want him to get hurt."

Robby pushed the button to call the elevator. "Yes, he probably does. That's why you're going to keep your mouth shut and act like nothing is wrong. You think you can do that?"

The elevator doors opened, and he pushed her on board.

"I don't know. What if I look nervous and he suspects something?"

"Then I'll kill you both."

She swallowed back the bile that had risen in her throat and found the words to pray. *Please God, don't let anyone get hurt.*

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When they stepped off the elevators, Robby put on his coat and put the gun in his pocket, moving it so she could see where it was pointing.

“You don’t have to do this. I’ve told you everything I can. Taking me isn’t going to help you.”

“We’ll see. But I meant what I said. As long as you cooperate, I won’t hurt you. If you’re telling me the truth, you’ll be fine.”

“But I have been telling you the truth.”

“Start moving. And remember not to do anything to arouse suspicion.”

She lowered her hands as they approached the lobby, doing her best to act naturally, but it was hard.

“Titus,” Robby said as they rounded the corner. “My man. I didn’t know you were on shift tonight.”

“Hey, my guy called in sick, and I couldn’t find anyone to fill in, so I’m pulling a double shift.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, but it’s the burden you bear when you’re the boss.” He looked at his watch. “I didn’t think anyone was still here. Late night for you two?”

“Yeah, Hannah’s a hard taskmaster. She was determined to get the data entered so she could get busy processing.”

Hannah smiled stiffly.

“You’re missing a great fight tonight,” Titus said, holding up his phone.

“Don’t tell me. I plan on watching it from the beginning when I finally get home.”

“You be careful you don’t work him too hard, Hannah.”

“Yeah.” She turned to face the door to keep from giving away her fear.

“See you tomorrow,” Robby said.

---

Once they were outside of the building, Hannah prayed for an opportunity to get away. If he didn’t have a gun, she’d make a run for it. There was enough traffic that a woman being chased would be noticed by someone who would call the police. But she didn’t know how serious he was with the weapon, and she couldn’t dodge a bullet.

“I’m parked in the garage over there.”

She continued walking in front of him. When they passed the gates and

entered the garage, she pulled her purse in front of her and grabbed the pepper spray again.

*Please, help me, God. Don't let him take me. I don't want to die.*

“The dark blue Volvo is mine. Hang on. You'll have to drive. Here.”

When she turned, he was holding the keys. He pushed the button to unlock the car, then held it out for her to take.

She looked down at his other hand, still in his pocket. They weren't far from the exit. If she could make it around the corner before he could fire, she'd have a chance.

She stepped closer to him, her heart racing as she reached for the keys, but at the last second, she lifted her other hand, spraying him in the eyes before sprinting for the exit.

The panic that drove her seared the breath in her lungs. She could hear his heavy steps behind.

“Stop! Wait!”

She dared to look, even though she didn't want to. Somehow, he was gaining on her as he wiped at his face with both his hands. That meant he wasn't holding the gun.

She turned to focus on the path in front of her and let the terror push her forward. But right before she made it out into the open, his hand grabbed her arm, and he yanked her around. The last thing she saw was his fist swinging toward her head. Then the lights went off.

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## Chapter 10

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HANNAH'S EARS whooshed as she fought the fog of a dream. She couldn't remember falling asleep. She couldn't even remember going home. All she could remember was finding Robby in her office. Or was that part of the dream? That couldn't have been real. He attacked her. He accused her of having a scam going in Burma for her own benefit. It must have been a bad dream.

Steadying her breathing helped as full consciousness returned, and she blinked awake in the dark. Had she fainted? A muffled thrumming surrounded her, along with a vibration. She tried to roll over but couldn't. Her knees banged on something as she came fully aware of the tiny space around her and threw her arms out in alarm, hitting the roof inches from her head.

She sucked in fast breaths as her memory fully returned and she realized she was in the trunk of a car. The nightmare was real.

Her hands pressed against the sides of her prison as she focused on keeping her panic under control. Her body tingled as shock crept in. The last

thing she wanted was to pass out, but the fear continued to turn her stomach in violent circles, and she blew out slow breaths to settle it.

“This can’t be happening. Please, God. Don’t let me die.”

She ran her hand along the sides and bottom of the cabin, searching for anything she could use as a weapon. Her finger found the space in the cover where the spare tire was kept, but it was impossible to lift it with her body on top of it. She twisted, pressing herself as far back as she could go, her neck protesting in pain at the movement. She touched it and found it was tender. The hit that knocked her out was beyond her memories, but that would explain why she’d been unconscious.

As she tried to lever the cover out of the way, the car turned and stopped, and she frantically yanked at the panel, bending it against her body. But it was no use. The car door opened, then closed, and she pulled herself into a fetal position with no idea what her fate was from here.

When the trunk opened, Robby was there, his face drawn in worry and his eyes red and swollen from the pepper spray.

“I’m sorry about all this,” he said. “It isn’t how I wanted things to go. You feeling okay?”

She didn’t know how to respond. His concern sounded genuine enough to ease her fear, but what did he expect her to say in return? That everything was fine, and he shouldn’t worry about it?

“I won’t hurt you,” he said.

“You already did.” She reached for her neck.

He rubbed his own. “Yeah. Like I said —”

“You’re sorry. I heard.” She sat up, and he took a step back.

“But I did warn you. Everything about this mission is highly sensitive. I couldn’t risk you getting away and warning the others.”

“What others?”

“You can give up the act. I know there’s no way you could do this all on your own.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We’ll see. You can climb out now.”

“What if I like it where I am?”

“You’re going to make me use force again?”

“I’m sorry for not being cooperative with your kidnapping.”

“I’m not kidnapping you.”

“What do you call forcing someone to come with you against their will?”

“You can consider yourself a POW for lack of a better term.”

“Prisoner of war? Great. So I have some conspiracy nut taking me hostage. No wonder you think I’m guilty of some imaginary crime.”

“I’m not a conspiracy nut. I told you I work with the federal government.”

“And I’m supposed to just believe you? What war is it you think I’m a part of, anyway?”

“That’s what I’d like to find out.”

“This would go a lot smoother if you’d fill me in on what you want me to confess.”

“All I want is the truth. Do you need help getting out of there?”

“No.” She climbed out, her body protesting in stiffness. “Where are we?” She looked around the underground parking garage. Different from the one they’d come from. There was only one other vehicle she could see, and it was covered with a tarp.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Why? What good will it do you? Besides, it’s on loan, so nothing that’s here today will be here tomorrow. Or at least by next week.”

She scoffed. “Can you at least tell me who you work for?”

“Didn’t I already do that?”

“I mean for real this time.”

“I wasn’t lying before.”

“What kind of government official punches a woman in the neck to knock her out? Or threatens the life of an innocent security guard?”

“I wouldn’t have actually hurt Titus. I was only bluffing to get you out the door. He’s a good guy. I didn’t want him involved in all of this. But don’t worry, I only hit girls when they’re the bad guys and only when it’s absolutely necessary.”

“So, in your sick, twisted little mind, I’m the bad guy? You don’t even have the decency to recognize what you really are?”

“And what’s that?”

“A deranged psycho, most likely.”

“You believe it’s wise to speak to a deranged man like that? Couldn’t I lose it and go crazy? Lose control?”

“Psychopaths have a great deal of control.”

“Then why are you trying to set me off?”



“I’m trying to get you to see reason. You’re not making any sense. I don’t know how you got it into your head that I’m a threat. I’m nobody.”

“Why don’t you come upstairs peacefully, and we can get a bit deeper into this thing. See if we can’t find some common ground.”

“That won’t happen.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t believe a word that I’m saying to you. Makes it sound like you’re not after the truth, just the story that goes along with the narrative in your head.”

“My perception of you has more to do with evidence than a made-up narrative.”

“What evidence?”

“Please, this way.”

All she could do was pray that God would give her the words she needed to convince Robby that she wasn’t involved in whatever it was he thought she was.

*Tell him everything*

The thought pressed into her mind. It wasn’t the first time that night. She’d felt the nudge back at the office, but she ignored it this time, just like the last. She’d given Robby all the information he’d asked for, and he hadn’t believed any of it. She wasn’t going to give him anything else.

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Robby climbed the stairs behind Hannah, unsure of what to make of her. She was definitely hiding something, but she was doing a good job of playing innocent. If there hadn’t been so much evidence to the contrary, he may have been inclined to believe her delusions. He’d told Fletcher that he thought there might be some kind of psychological issue connected to her father’s death. It was possible she believed the lies she told herself. If that was the case, then she truly did believe that she wasn’t doing anything wrong. He could work with that. All he had to do was make her believe he was on her side.

“Through that door,” he said once they reached the third floor.

If all else failed and she refused to come clean about who she was working with to exploit those kids, he didn’t like it, but he’d have to force it

out of her.

They entered a large room with a metal table in the middle and four chairs around it.

“Have a seat.”

“Is this for real?”

“What do you mean?”

She walked over to the table, pulling out a chair dramatically, and then fell into it. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Is Robby your real name?”

“It is.”

“Why not Rob or Robert?”

“I like Robby.”

“All right.” She folded her hands on the table. “Tell me what you want to know.”

“I want to know everything.”

“Okay. I like cucumbers but not carrots. I barely watch TV, but when I do, I binge. I go to bed too late and wake up too early.” She tapped a finger on her lip. “Let me see...what else?”

“Tell me more about Burma.”

“What about it?”

“Who are you working with?”

“I told you, I don’t have anything to do with that directly.”

“You have nothing to do with Burma? Nothing at all?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. Tell me about your connection.”

“I work for a company that imports rubber from plantations over there.”

“What about your other connection?”

“You mean how my family lived there when I was a little girl?”

“That’s a good place to start.”

“Did you already know about that?”

“I’ll ask the questions if you don’t mind. Tell me about your family.”

“Why? Both my parents are dead, and I have no siblings.”

“How did they die?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Indulge me.”

“You get a kick out of talking about death?”

“No, I need to establish the facts.”

“Fine. My dad died while we were still in Burma, and my mom died of heart disease last year.”

“How did your dad die?”

“I don’t want to talk about that with you.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s personal, and I’m not about to get personal with my kidnapper.”

“All right. How about we move back to the present? Tell me about what TreadCraft is doing in Burma.”

“You mean rubber? Or the schools?”

“The schools.”

“TreadCraft wants to give back to the areas it has connections with. Those kids over there are often mistreated and have few opportunities in life. TreadCraft helps where they can. Is it because you don’t like kids or something? Or is it education you’re against?”

“TreadCraft is building the schools. What’s your part?”

“I don’t know how many more ways I can say it. I wish I did have a part, but I don’t. End of story. If *you* don’t have an issue with it, then maybe it’s the government you say you work for. What’s their problem with building schools in Burma? Are they afraid if those kids get educated, there will be an uprising or something?”

“They don’t like your ideas?”

“What?”

“You said you would like to have a part in it, but you don’t. Don’t they like your ideas?”

“As a matter of fact, no.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know!” She huffed out her frustration, then settled. “Why don’t you ask them? It’s probably something to do with profits.”

“So they didn’t take you up on your ideas, and that’s why you’re operating on your own? You don’t care to implicate them at all? Or anyone else?”

“Implicate who in what?”

“Do they really not know what you’re doing? No one else in the office is involved?”

She rested her face in her hands. “This is ridiculous.”

“All you have to do is tell me what you’re doing, and this will all stop.”

“You said you have evidence.”

“I do.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine. There is nothing in my office to implicate me in anything, and there’s nothing outside of the office either, so why don’t you tell me what it is you think I’m doing, because I have no idea what you’re talking about. Or at least tell me about this evidence you apparently have, then I can explain it to you.”

He’d wanted to save it for later, but he was getting nowhere. Usually when he turned people in circles like he had been doing, the suspects couldn’t keep their facts straight, and something would slip out, but not with Hannah. “Tell me about the gentleman you invited in the backdoor of TreadCraft a couple weeks ago.”

She paled.

*There we go.* Finally, he’d hit on something.

“How do you know about that?”

He’d expected her to deny it. If he’d known it would move things along, he would have mentioned it at the beginning. “I watched you let him in.”

“What? Where? What?”

“I was watching from a nearby building.”

“You were watching me?” Her voice had lost volume.

“I was watching the building. I saw you let that guy in the back. Who is he?”

She closed her eyes, and her head sagged. “I was so worried about someone finding out. But after getting away with it for two weeks...” She shook it off and looked at him. “Of all the people, you’re the one who saw? Just my luck. Have you told anyone?”

He was surprised by how genuinely concerned she looked. The man must mean something to her if she tried so hard to protect him. Robby could use that to get her on his side. “Not yet. And I might not need to if you tell me who he is and how he’s connected.”

“You have to swear to me that you won’t hurt him.”

“I can’t make a promise like that.”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong. I’m the one at fault. I was the one who initiated it.”

“Okay.” He’d finally found the key he needed. Now she’d tell him everything he needed to know. “What’s his connection to you and Burma?”

She frowned. “Uh, he’s helped me in the past. But I don’t see what difference that makes.”

“This isn’t the first time you two have worked together?”

“I wouldn’t call it working together.”

“Call it whatever you want.”

“I’m helping him.”

It sounded like this guy had her wrapped around his finger. Either that or she was an evil mastermind who knew exactly what to say.

“Right,” Robby said, playing along just in case. “Great. All you have to do is tell me everything, and I’ll make sure he doesn’t carry the brunt of the fallout.”

“It’s not his fault. Please.”

“I told you, I’ll do what I can to protect him. Now, tell me everything.”

She let out a slow unsteady breath, then said, “His name’s Sal Abernathy. He’s an old friend of the family who’s down on his luck and needed some help.”

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## Chapter 11

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“THAT’S A GOOD START,” Robby said as he sat across from Hannah. He was still undecided if she was the one being played by this Sal Abernathy or if she was attempting to play him. He pulled out his phone and sent the name off to Green to look it up.

“What are you doing?” Hannah said.

“Nothing.”

“You typed something into your phone.”

“I sent a text.”

“Why?”

“To look into your friend Sal.”

She bit her lip. “Don’t do this. I’m begging you.”

“I’m not doing anything. It will help confirm your story, that’s all. Now, tell me about that night you let him inside. Was that the first time?”

“I don’t know. What was the date?”

“November seventh, I think. It was a Tuesday.”

“Then yes. That was the first time. I know I shouldn’t be letting him in at

all, but it's cold outside."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"If he slept on the street, he could die of exposure."

Robby stood and paced the room, unsure how to progress. "And here I was thinking we were getting somewhere." She was still trying to lead him down a rabbit hole. He had to convince her it wasn't worth the effort. "Are you telling me he's homeless?"

"Why else would I let him in?"

"Did he tell you he was homeless?" Could it be that she'd been duped by a con artist this whole time? It was hard to believe. It was clear she was an intelligent woman, and, regardless of any psychological issues she may have, in every other aspect, she had her head screwed on. But if this was an old family friend, it wouldn't be hard for him to take advantage of her.

"Trust me, there is no way Sal would ask for help if he wasn't desperate."

"And you believed him?"

"I didn't just believe him, I know it's the truth. Why won't you believe anything I say?"

Robby crossed his arms. They were back to square one. "I don't think you're taking this as seriously as you ought to be."

"I'm answering your questions as best as I can."

"So you're telling me you're letting some random homeless man into a highly secure building with classified information contained within because it's chilly outside?"

"I told you, he's not a stranger. I've known Sal for years. He's a good man, and it's been more than just chilly. He sleeps in a closet. It would be impossible for him to get anywhere near classified documents. You have a pass, and you couldn't do it. Besides, he wouldn't even know what he was looking for if he did."

"I found plenty, and I could have gotten more if you hadn't turned up. It wouldn't be that hard for someone who knows what they're doing. Getting inside is the hardest part, and you did that for him. He's had weeks. Not that he'd need it. You could slip him your card, and he could get away with all sorts of things."

"Get away with what? He's harmless, and he's not interested in classified information." She stopped when her eyes filled with tears. After taking a moment to compose herself, she continued. "Is that why I'm here? Because you think Sal's there to harm the company? Because he's not. I swear to you

there's nothing bad he could do except maybe vomit or wet himself, which would be horrible for him *and* me because I'd be the one who had to clean it up."

"I don't believe you."

"Please. He's done nothing wrong. It was my idea."

"What was?"

"To let him sleep there."

"That can't be everything."

"It is." She huffed. "If you won't believe me, then maybe you'll believe him."

Robby squinted. He couldn't tell if she was bluffing, but he knew one way to find out. "All right. Let's go meet him."

Her face flattened. "What, now?"

"Why not? You said I could meet him, and it's cold tonight. I assume he's asleep in the closet as we speak?"

"He is, but —"

"It will clear up a few things."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I don't trust you. I don't think you'd have his best interest in mind."

"I wouldn't, but that doesn't mean I won't respect a homeless man trying to keep warm."

"But you don't think he is."

"Look, Hannah, if he is who you say he is, then you have nothing to worry about. I will treat him with nothing but kindness."

"Really?"

"Really."

"And if it's all true, will you stop second-guessing everything I say?"

"If there's a bum sleeping in the closet, I promise I'll believe everything you say from now on."

"He's not a bum. He's just had a hard life."

"If you say so."

"You can't pull a gun on him. He's got nothing to do with whatever it is you're after. It will freak him out, and he's already on rocky ground."

"I won't pull my gun as long as he doesn't threaten me."

She drummed her fingers on the table. "He was drunk when he came in. If he's frightened by you, he could react."



“I can handle a drunk. If we find everything as you say, I won’t harm him. I promise.” He didn’t believe a word of it. It was impossible that the story she was telling was true. He’d have his weapon ready, but that wasn’t all. The fact that she was even considering saying yes meant they may have prepared for this eventuality.

“He’s a good man,” she said.

“So you’ve said.”

“Okay, I’ll take you to him. But only you. If you’ve got anyone else you’re working with, I won’t do it.”

“Just me.”

“Okay.”

“Great. I need to make a call first, and I have an errand or two to run. Then we’ll be off.”

“I thought you wanted to go now?”

“We’ll let him sleep off the alcohol a bit longer. In the meantime, you can sit tight.”

“For how long?”

“Not long. And if this homeless guy turns out to be what you say he is, you may even get a few hours of shuteye before work tomorrow.”

“There’s no other way you’ll let me go?”

“Not one that I can think of. Unless you have more information to give me that you haven’t shared yet.”

“I don’t.”

He smirked. If this was the ambush he hoped it would be, he’d have more than just Hannah in custody by the end of the night. It would make his job easier having another suspect. Two made it easier to break one. Not only that, but he had a strong feeling that this newcomer would be the brains of the operation. The way she wanted to protect him meant he’d likely manipulated her. By the end of the night, he’d have more answers.

“I’ll be back soon.”

---

Hannah watched Robby go, then rested her head on the table. She was exhausted and confused, although not as scared as she thought she should be. It was the anxiety that twisted her stomach now. She was worried about how

Sal would react. She could see in Robby's eyes that he didn't believe her, but she wasn't afraid of him anymore, and she was sure that once Robby met Sal and realized she'd been telling the truth, he'd finally be convinced that she wasn't involved in whatever it was he was chasing.

His questions about Burma were unsettling. She was trying to grasp what it was he wanted her to say, but espionage was the only thing she could come up with that would warrant this kind of behavior. But how that connected to building schools in Burma was beyond her understanding. Or what other evidence he thought he had found. And if Robby did really work for the government, then that meant he was investigating something real. Something that didn't involve her, but it must involve someone at work. Was it possible that someone else at TreadCraft was guilty of the crimes he'd convinced himself she was guilty of?

*You need to tell him everything.*

She stood, pushing aside the thought that now bordered on a command. Whoever this Robby guy was, it didn't matter if he was right or wrong. He'd gone too far.

"Were you not there when he knocked me out and threw me in his trunk?" she said to the ceiling. "He hasn't believed a word I've said, and you want me to tell him personal things about my life? No way."

Folding her arms, she watched the door, then looked up at the two high windows that had bars on them.

"How about you get me out of here instead? Get the police here." She smiled at the thought of seeing Robby led away in handcuffs. It would be nice to see him answer for the way he'd treated her.

She went to the door and tried the handle, but it was locked. If she could stall long enough, Sal would be out of the building by the time they arrived, but then Robby would think she was lying to him.

"Please, God, don't let Sal react when we wake him up. I don't want him to get hurt." She had no idea how he'd take the disruption. He may never speak to her again if he thought she'd put him in danger, but she had no choice. When she got the chance, she'd explain that to him. After she lost her dad, he'd become very protective of her, but losing his family meant his focus had turned more internal, and she had no way of knowing what this would do to him. She'd have to hope and pray that God used this for Sal's good somehow. He'd done it before. He could do it again.

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Robby walked to the end of the hall and called Holland.

“How’s the undercover op going?” Holland said when he answered.

“Not as well as I’d hoped. My mark caught me snooping.”

“You’re kidding. How’d that happen?”

“Everyone had gone for the night, but she came back.”

“I think that’s another first for you. You don’t usually slip up like that. You’re really racking them up on this assignment.”

“I didn’t slip up. It was an unforeseen occurrence. She’d gone home for the night. Or so I thought. And it means I’ve had to change tactics. I brought her to the warehouse, but she’s holding out.”

“Your cover is blown.”

“Only to her, but I think I can salvage it. She’s telling me some tall tales, and I’m going to call her bluff. If I’m lucky, I’ll catch a break. But I’ll need you and the boys to get up here as soon as you can.”

“Is this about that name you sent to Green?”

“Yeah. Did he find anything?”

“Not much. Not worth reporting on. Divorced man with a couple of grown-up kids.”

“Any connection to Burma?”

“Not that we could find.”

“She could have given me a fake name. Any address?”

“Nothing recent. When do you need us? Are we talking hours?”

“Less. You’ll need the chopper.”

“Have you talked to Fletcher about this?”

“I’ll leave that up to you. I’ll send you the details, but basically, I need to flush this thing out. You guys get into position and wait for my signal. If we get two of them in custody, we can work them against each other, but I think this might be the big fish we’ve been after.”

“Where exactly do you want us?”

“There’s a loading bay out the back. Be ready to blow the door. And put Fletcher on alert for me. I’ll need him here if this goes the way I think it might. I’ll need him here to do the explaining.”

“You know he doesn’t like us to make a mess on U.S. soil. It’s harder to clean up when we don’t have an FBI or police badge to back us up.”

“We don’t have time for that.”

“You sure?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I wasn’t. It’s now or never. She isn’t budging, and I’ve already crossed too many lines. I need to get this wrapped up before it gets any more out of hand.”

“Robby.”

“Don’t. I know what you’re going to say. I only did what was necessary. I’m not asking you to break in. I’m asking you to be ready to come to my aid when I’m threatened.”

“Okay. We’ll be ready.”

“Thanks.”

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## Chapter 12

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ROBBY TOOK his time getting a small meal. It was the safest way he could stall without giving it away.

When he came back into the room, Hannah was asleep with her head on the table.

He cleared his throat, and she jumped.

“Didn’t mean to scare you. I got some dinner. You hungry?”

He put the burger on the table in front of her, and she resisted but finally picked it up.

“I didn’t poison it,” he said.

“I didn’t say you did. I can pay you back if you give me my purse.”

“It’s fine. I can buy your dinner.”

“I don’t like the idea that you think I owe you anything.”

“You don’t.”

She took a bite, then swallowed and said, “Is there a reason we haven’t left yet?”

“I told you. I don’t want him still drunk when he wakes up.”

“I don’t think it will matter. He’ll be ruffled being woken up by a strange man whether he’s drunk or not.”

Robby’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it out. It was Holland saying they were en route and would be in position in twenty minutes. He responded to the text, then waited for her to finish her burger.

“You ready?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Sure, we could skip the whole thing and you could sleep here, but you’ll be on the floor. I haven’t prepared any provisions for a sleepover.”

“Why is it you sound amused by all of this?”

“Trust me, it’s not amusement. If you’d like, I can adjust my attitude to a more angry demeanor. Would that make you more comfortable?”

“Can we just go and get this over with?”

“Sure. Just remember, if you tip Titus off, you’re both in trouble.”

“Except you won’t kill him.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t have other options available to me.”

---

Hannah dragged her feet as they approached the building, then swiped her card at the after-hours door into the lobby.

“You two are back again?” Titus said. “Man, that is some serious dedication to the job. I don’t recommend it in the long term.”

“We have a bet going,” Robby said.

“Oh, is that what’s happening? What kind of bet?”

“It’s about one of the new products. We were talking about the personal touch the technicians put on some of their work. I think someone took credit for another’s work.”

“Based on this personal touch?”

“Yup.”

“Interesting theory. I’ll be curious to hear the outcome, but I hope Hannah wins the bet. I’d hate to think anyone who works here is underhanded like that.”

Hannah gave him a tight smile. “We’ll let you know.”

“We won’t be too long,” Robby said.

“Take as long as you need. If what you say is true. I think it’s important

you get to the bottom of it.”

Once they were in the back hall, Hannah stopped and turned to Robby. “Did you have that prepared ahead of time? That bet story?”

“I did. Why?”

“Is that why we’re here? Is that what you think is going on, that I’ve stolen someone else’s work?”

“No. I made it up.”

“Oh. Okay, well, just remember, no weapons. Sal’s probably sleeping.”

“Uh-huh.”

She continued to look at him, the space between her eyebrows deepening as her frown grew.

“What?” he said when she didn’t move.

“I don’t want Sal getting hurt. If you do anything...” She had no ultimatum to give him. If he decided either one of them was a threat, he and his team would easily remove the danger. “Let’s just say you’d better behave yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m only here for answers.”

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Hannah cleared her throat when they reached the closet door. She hated that embarrassment heated her cheeks. It was more for Sal than herself. She didn’t like the idea of Robby judging him because of his rough life and the outward appearance that reflected that.

“Stand back a little. I don’t want him to be startled.”

Robby did as she asked, moving to the side in case any shots were fired. His hand rested on the gun at his hip, and his other hand held his phone ready to ping Holland as soon as he sensed danger.

She knocked lightly. “Hey, Sal. You in there? It’s me, Hannah.” She listened for a response, but none came. Shifting between Robby and the door, she slowly turned the knob before opening it a few inches to let in the light.

“Sal? Don’t worry. It’s me, Hannah.”

“Ha-Hannah? Wha—did I miss the alarm?” His voice was choked with sleep. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t get you in trouble, did I?”

She pushed the door open farther to let in more light. “No. I got into my own trouble, but I do need your help to get out of it.”

“You need my help? How?”

“I have someone with me.”

Sal shot up, throwing the blanket back. “What? Who?”

“No one you have to worry about. No one who wants to hurt you. He saw me let you in the building.”

“I—I did get you in trouble.”

“No. He’s not with TreadCraft. He’s just a concerned citizen, and he wants to make sure that all you’re doing here is sleeping.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I need to show him that you are who you say you are.”

“Why?”

“I need you to trust me on this. He’s behind me. He just needs to meet you, and then we’ll go.” She stepped back to let Robby show himself.

“Open the door all the way,” Robby said, shifting to the side so he could get a look into the room without exposing himself to the occupant. Hannah looked down at the phone in his hand.

“What are you doing? Are you recording this?”

“No.”

She tsked, then entered the room, pushing the door aside as she went. “You have nothing to worry about,” she told Sal as he put a hand up to shade his eyes from the light.

“This is Robby. He’s concerned you’re here to steal company secrets.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“But doesn’t this still look bad?” Sal whispered loudly. “I’m still trespassing. How do you know he won’t get us both in trouble for that?”

“That’s not what I’m here for,” Robby said. “What’s your name?”

“Salvatore Abernathy, but my friends call me Sal.”

“Do you believe me now?” Hannah said. “Or do you want to interrogate him, too? Maybe he was here having a nap before he got into the hard work of breaking into the laboratory.”

“You know, for a kidnap victim, you sure are sarcastic.”

“Kidnap?” Sal tried to push himself onto his feet but tripped and fell back.

“You okay?” She rushed to help him.

“Are you in danger? I can take him. I won’t let him hurt you.” He tried to stand again but needed Hannah’s help to get up.



“No, Sal. I’m fine.”

“Don’t worry. She’s off the hook.” Robby lifted his phone to his ear.

“Who are you calling?” Hannah said, ready to smack the phone from his hand.

“Stand down,” he said into the phone. “It was a false alarm.”

“Stand down?” Hannah said as Robby listened to whoever was on the other side of the call.

“I still need to get my head around a few things,” he said. “I’ll let you know.”

“Who were you talking to?” Hannah said once he put his phone away.

“My team. They were outside waiting for my signal.”

“For what?”

“To blow the door.”

“Are you serious?”

“You didn’t think I’d come in here without backup.”

“Why would you need backup?”

“In case this was an ambush.”

“Whoa,” Sal said. “Now hang on a second. I have never hurt anyone... well...not lately. I certainly wouldn’t have hurt you. Not unless you tried to do something to Hannah, anyway.”

Robby shrugged. “I didn’t know what to expect. Certainly not this.”

“You are incredible, do you know that?” she said.

“Why thank you.”

She shoved him. He looked surprised but didn’t react. “The one thing you didn’t expect was that I was telling you the truth?”

“Based on the information I have, this scenario was the least plausible.”

“Then the information you have is wrong. I think it’s time for you to give *me* some answers.”

“You’re in no position to demand anything from me. You still have a lot of explaining to do.”

“You said if I was telling you the truth about Sal, you’d believe everything else I said.”

“Did I say that?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then I’d like to hear what else you have to say.”

“That’s the whole problem. I have nothing to say. There is nothing else to tell you. I’d like to go home. I was telling the truth about Sal and everything

else, and I'm tired."

Robby looked at Sal. "We don't need to involve you in this anymore. You can go back to sleep if you want."

"Only if you can assure me that Hannah is in no trouble. If you hurt one hair on her head, I will hunt you down."

Hannah winced. Sal was trying his best, but he was no match for Robby. Not that she wanted him to have any more involvement in this. "It's okay. I'll be fine. I can handle it from here. You just focus on finding work so you don't have to sleep here anymore and be bothered by strangers."

"You sure you're not in any trouble?"

"Not over this. Get some sleep."

"I promise I won't hurt her," Robby added.

"Okay then." Sal sat back down and pulled the canvas over him. "You two have a good night."

"Good night, Sal."

Hannah caught a smirk on Robby's face as she closed the door.

"What?" she demanded.

"What?"

"You think he's a joke?"

"That's not what I was smiling about."

"Sal's trying his best."

"I know. I'm sure he is."

"He doesn't need bullies giving him a hard —"

"Hannah. I know. He has nothing to be ashamed of. Some people have it tougher than others. I wish him all the best. I promise."

"Good."

---

Hannah stormed down the hall, but Robby hung back. He was at a loss as to where to go from here. He was generally very good at his job and even better at reading people. But Hannah had him baffled. He couldn't ever remember getting things this wrong. Even that question about his story to Titus being real.

He was beginning to think that she really had no idea what was going on, and he had to consider the fact that his brother's death might be affecting his

judgment. But he'd have to wait until later to do a soul-searching expedition. He still had questions that needed answers, and he wanted them tonight. There was one more piece of evidence that needed an explanation. So far, she hadn't given him any information that would satisfy him regarding the documents he'd found in her office.

"You know, if you want my help, then you'll need to tell me what it is you're looking for. If there really is something going on here at TreadCraft, I hope you know I would help you get to the bottom of it."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. But first I want to know who you really are and what team you had outside."

"Looks like neither one of us believes the other. The team I work with is connected to the government."

"So that's all true."

"Yes."

"For real. You're an FBI agent or something?"

"Not FBI. We mostly do overseas work. But sometimes our assignments bring us here."

"To Pittsburgh."

"In this case, yes."

"Then why are you after me?" She stopped before they entered the lobby. "You were asking about Burma. What could I have possibly done to make you think I'd committed some crime over there?"

"We know TreadCraft is connected somehow, but whether the company knows of its wrongdoing or it's someone who works for them, I haven't figured out yet. I thought you were my linchpin."

"Why?"

"I saw you let Sal into the building, and I looked into you. I found your past connection and thought you might be involved. Then I found that paperwork in your office."

"Wait a minute. You're saying you actually found something in my office that pins this on me?"

"Yes."

"I can't even begin to imagine what that could be."

"You had documents related to Burma."

"The children?"

"Yes. You had reports on the rubber plantations. They contained an awful

lot of information about the children working there and about the schools nearby.”

“That’s it?”

“I found a report about exploiting them. Facts and figures. It was very thorough.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I really wish you would have started with that.”

“I figured you’d lie about it.”

“How about I tell you the truth and save us all any more misunderstanding.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I’ve been building a portfolio so I can convince TreadCraft to invest more into the area and improve the standard of living. All that information about exploitation was to put an exclamation point on how important it is for the company to step in and make lasting changes. It’s the whole reason I started working for them in the first place. You really thought I was trying to hurt them?”

“Someone is.”

“Well, it’s definitely not me. And if you don’t believe me, you can ask Pike or anyone else who was in the meeting where I completely humiliated myself by baring my soul in order to convince them that my position was the right one. Obviously, they didn’t go for it.”

Maybe she was a really good liar. Or maybe she was telling the truth. He had a decision to make. “I need to find who’s responsible.”

“Is that really true? Is someone from TreadCraft hurting those kids?”

“Yes.”

She frowned and pushed open the door, entering the lobby.

“Hey, who won the bet?” Titus said.

“I did,” Hannah said.

“You don’t look very pleased with yourself.”

“That’s because this whole night has been a disaster. We’ll see you later.”

Once they were out in the cold, Robby stopped her. “Please. I need more answers. You may not be who I’m looking for, but if you’re not, then that someone is still out there.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Please. You have to know something.”

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Hannah's head spun. The idea that someone at TreadCraft would actually be working against everything she fought so hard for sucked all of her energy away. She sighed and looked up the street at a café that was open.

"Why don't we skip the warehouse and go get a coffee? Then you can convince me that I should help you."

"You need convincing?"

"After the way you treated me? Yes. Prove to me that this is really going on, and I will tell you whatever I can."

"I can't say much. It's confidential information."

*Tell him everything.*

She dropped her head in resignation. She wouldn't resist anymore. She couldn't. This night had been too much.

"You mentioned my past being a concern."

"Yes. I know what happened to your dad."

"Then how can you think I had anything to do with this?"

"Because you saw it. You watched them kill him."

"And you think I blame those kids?"

"I could understand if you did. Your dad was murdered by the people he was helping."

Her throat tightened, and she paused, not willing to get emotional in front of Robby. All she needed was to give him the facts. He didn't need to see her emotional attachment to it.

"Do you have any idea what it was like to watch kids your own age kill someone? Kill your dad?"

"No. I can't. But it must have been devastating."

"They were brainwashed into believing my dad was the enemy."

"Do you believe they should have faced consequences for their actions?"

She blinked away the images that threatened. "Do you know what they do to those kids to get them to behave that way?"

"I do."

"Then you can understand why I want to do everything in my power to make sure no other kids have to experience that again. They were vulnerable, and the militia took advantage of that. They are the ones responsible. I came to TreadCraft because I thought I could make a difference. I thought TreadCraft was making a real difference, and with such a massive budget, I

had hoped the company would do more.”

Robby nodded.

“And now you’re telling me that there is something nefarious going on? Because if they’re involved in hurting these kids, whether knowingly or because of neglect, you need to understand that I will do whatever it takes to stop them.”

“If I could tell you more, I would.”

“That’s it? After everything that’s happened tonight, you’re going to leave me with nothing?”

“I only got you involved because I thought you already were. But it’s too dangerous for you to do more. You could get yourself killed. Or worse.”

“You think I care about that? With what I now know is happening over in Burma?”

“You should.”

“What I care about is TreadCraft’s connection.”

“Hannah.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll find out some other way. It would be easier to let me be your inside source. I can find out things for you, if you’d just let me know what it is you need. I can assure you I want this more than you.”

He considered her for a moment, his hands tucked into his armpits to keep them warm. “How about that coffee?”

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## Chapter 13

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ROBBY WATCHED Hannah as she took a careful sip of her coffee. He'd decided to trust her with the information he had. After seeing Sal and then hearing about her experience with her dad, everything made more sense, and he knew that the best way forward was to get her help. Her expression had changed several times as she processed the information he'd shared and finally settled into a hard frown.

"Do you have any thoughts?" he said when she continued to stare at the table. "Any idea who might be involved?"

Her mouth bunched together while she tried to find a response.

She took another sip, then said, "So, let me get this straight." Her voice had a slight tremor. "The school that TreadCraft paid for and built was being used by a militant group that was full of kids they were using for cover."

"Yes."

"And your conclusion was that I was the one who organized it?"

"I thought you were angry at the kids because of what happened to your dad. But I didn't believe you were working alone. You'd need more than one

person to organize an operation like that. Not to mention if your mental state was what I thought it was, you'd need someone with a clear head. So I thought you could lead me to who was involved. When I saw you with Sal, I knew something was up. I just didn't know what. Then I found those documents in your desk, and that sealed it for me."

"That's why you said all those things at the office that made me hate you?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Knowing what I know now, I understand your reaction, but at the time, I was trying to show you I was on your side and wanted to help you get your revenge."

"You wanted me to bring you in on whatever horrible plan I had going."

"Exactly."

"Besides me, who else did you think was involved?"

"Just you and Sal. I didn't look anywhere else, because I was convinced it was you. Until I proved that wrong, you were my main line of inquiry."

"You mean, you jumped to conclusions?"

"Yes, actually. I did. And I'm sorry about that."

"Hang on a second." She pushed her cup back. "At the grocery store where we first met. You were trying to pick me up so you could get close to me? That was all fake?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That is so embarrassing. I can't believe I fell for it."

"Embarrassing for me, maybe. You turned me down, remember?"

"Yeah, but I didn't want to."

"Really?" He couldn't help the smile. "Here I was thinking I tanked."

"But you didn't mean any of it."

"That's not true."

"So you would have tried to pick me up if I was some random person you came across?"

"No. I don't pick women up in the grocery store, but I'm not saying I wouldn't have noticed you. You've certainly gotten my attention now. You're a surprising person."

"I'm more ordinary than you think."

"I've seen enough to know that's not true. The suffering you've been through, not just your dad, but the kids too. All that pain, and you still hold strongly to your faith. Or at least, I'm assuming what you said before about following God is true."



“I shouldn’t be surprised you didn’t believe me. You didn’t believe anything else I said.”

“At the very least, I thought your understanding of him was warped.”

“It was my faith that kept me going through everything. Jesus was the reason I could hold it together. My mom fell apart after what happened. She was never really the same after we came back.”

“But wouldn’t it be easier to believe the opposite? That there is no way God can exist with all this suffering?”

“Easier? No way. God is the only way I can make sense of it all.”

“I don’t follow.”

“In your line of work, you’d see a lot of bad stuff.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I need a God who is just in ways I can never be, but I also need a God who understands unfathomable love. I can’t make sense of the world any other way. I loved my dad so much, and it destroyed me to see him die, but I also know that what was done to those kids to make them behave that way was horrible. I need to know that God understands that pain and can unscramble the chaos of it all. I need to know that, in the end, His justice will prevail no matter what. And in a way that I can’t understand because I can’t make sense of it. I need to know He loves those kids even with their heads so messed up that they did unthinkable acts.”

Robby sipped his coffee to distract from the emotion she’d evoked in him. He had to admit that what she said made sense in a way he’d never considered. Believing that there was something higher than himself, someone who could understand what he could never grasp when nothing made sense, gave him a greater sense of purpose. To believe he was part of God’s plan to bring justice into the world and that there was an end to it all. Where right wins. It gave him a strange sense of peace he’d never known.

“So what now?” Hannah asked. “Where do we go from here?”

“That’s up to you. Do you think you can go into work tomorrow and act normal? Because if you can’t, stay home sick so you don’t blow my cover.”

“Oh, I’m definitely going to work tomorrow. If TreadCraft or any of its employees are knowingly a part of this, I’ll do whatever it takes to bring them down. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“First of all, slow down. I don’t want you to do anything different from what you normally do. Act natural, and let me do all the work.”

“You don’t want my help?”

“It’s not about wanting it. There could be dangerous people involved. You need to stay safe.”

“I’ll be fine. But I have access to offices and the labs. I can have a look around if you tell me what I’m looking for.”

“I don’t need you to do that.”

“I didn’t bare my heart and soul with you so I could sit back and watch. I want in. I want to be a part of this.”

“You are a part of this. You’ve done a lot already. But if you know anyone I should start looking into, I’m all ears.”

“I’ll spot something quicker.”

“Please, Hannah, drop it. There is no way I will let you put yourself in a compromising position. This is my mission.”

“You’re wasting an opportunity.”

“That’s fine by me. Now, do you know anyone who might be involved or not? Even if it’s a long shot.”

“I have to reevaluate everyone in the office. I never would have imagined anything like this could happen. I can give you a list of names of those connected to Burma and the fundraising, but some of those guys...I find it hard to believe they’re involved.”

“Who’s the first person that comes to mind that could be guilty?”

“Does it still count if prejudice is involved?”

“Maybe.”

“Pike, my boss, comes to mind, but I think that’s because of how he’s been treating me lately.”

A protective instinct rose up in Robby. Even if Pike wasn’t involved, he still might have to step in. “What’s he done? I know he’s interested in you. Has he acted on it?”

“What? No. He thinks my Christianity is cute. I hate that. It’s condescending.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s enough for me.”

“What I mean is, from where I was sitting, he seemed to think more than your faith was cute.”

She grunted. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. You don’t think guys can see that stuff?”

“It’s not what you think. He’s had about six girlfriends already this year.”

“I wasn’t thinking he was looking for a girlfriend. I was thinking he likes

to try out whatever interests him at the moment. To him, you're like forbidden fruit."

"Yeah, well, I haven't reciprocated his flirtations."

"Exactly. He wants what he can't have."

"Don't get me wrong. He's been a great boss, and he hasn't crossed any lines, but lately...I don't know. He's taken a greater interest."

"What makes you think he's involved with Burma?"

"He's the kind of guy who would take advantage of an opportunity that arose. Do I think he would willingly put kids' lives at risk? I sure hope not."

"It's worth looking into. Maybe you could distract him for me while I —"

"Are you kidding?"

"Why not? You said you wanted to help."

"I'm going to assume by the impish look on your face that you're joking."

"I am. I would never put you in a situation like that."

"If it would help, though, I can get into his office and check his files."

"Nice try, but I can do it."

"You have no reason to be in there. I do."

"You're not going to pull me back into the argument. All I need is for you to answer me one question."

"Okay."

"Are you capable of seeing me at work and not looking weird or suspicious?"

"Yes, of course."

"Great. Then that's all I need for you to do."

"I'll do it, but under one condition."

"Maybe."

"Are you always this difficult?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask my team. Tell me what you want, and I'll see what I can do."

"I want you to keep me in the loop. If you find out anything, I want to know."

"We'll see how we go."

"What's that mean?"

"I mean there are some things that I'm not at liberty to divulge."

"Can you at least tell me who's responsible when you find out?"

“I can’t promise I’ll tell you as soon as I know anything, but yes. I’ll make sure you know by the end.”

Her shoulders sagged. “That’s all you’re going to give me?”

“I understand you’re frustrated, but I’ve got protocols to follow. I’m not going to throw them out the window for a pretty face.”

“I’m—” She gave him a weird look. “I’m not asking as a pretty face. I’m invested in this.”

“I know you are. I get it. And I promise to tell you everything I am able. I’ve already told you more than I should have.”

“Okay. I guess I should be grateful you told me what you did. But please let me know if there’s anything else I can do to help. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure they can’t get away with it anymore. Whoever they are.”

“I promise.”

“Okay. You have a deal.”

“We should probably get home and get some rest. We both have work tomorrow.”

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## Chapter 14

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HANNAH'S PLAN for coming into work that morning was to ignore and avoid Robby exactly like she had been doing, but it wasn't as easy as she'd expected it to be. It took all her willpower not to look at him every time she walked through the bullpen.

"Hey, Hannah," Pike called as she walked past his door to get a cup of coffee.

"Morning."

"Are you getting another coffee?"

"I am."

"You've been drinking an awful lot of caffeine lately. Everything okay? Not sleeping well still?"

"I didn't know you were keeping track. But no, I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

"You want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about."

Pike lifted his gaze over her shoulder. "Does it have anything to do with

the new guy?”

“Who, Robby?” She straightened. “No. I can’t stand the guy. Why?”

“I saw you talking to him the other day. I hope he’s not giving you any trouble.”

“No. He knows where I stand. He’s not bothering me anymore.”

“Anymore?”

“It’s nothing. We don’t see the world the same way, that’s all.”

“You sure that’s all?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m still waiting for that dinner, you know.”

“Pike.”

“Don’t give me that look. I told you, it’s just dinner with a coworker.”

“That’s not what it will look like to anyone else.”

“Who cares what anyone else thinks?”

“I do.”

“I’m going to keep bugging you until you change your mind.”

“You’d be wasting your time.”

“It’s my time to waste.”

“Suit yourself. Hey, did you get that report I sent through earlier?”

“I did, but I haven’t had a chance to look it over yet.” He checked his watch. “I’ve got a meeting in an hour that I have to prepare for, so I’m afraid it will have to wait.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got a pile of work I need to get through.”

“We’ll talk later.”

“Okay.”

She left Pike’s office and went to the kitchen. As she passed Robby’s desk, she cleared her throat. Hopefully, he’d get her hint.

In the kitchen, she stalled for time by washing the dishes someone had left in the sink. Then she refilled the water tank on the coffee machine before finally making her coffee.

Robby walked in and went to the fridge.

“Would you mind getting me the milk?” she said.

“Sure.”

When he handed it to her, she stared at it for a long second, then looked up at him. He had that same impish grin he’d given her before.

“Thanks. This is harder than I thought.”

“Making coffee?”

“No. Pretending I don’t like you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Was that throat clearing for me? Or are you coming down with something?”

“No, I wanted to tell you that Pike is headed out for a meeting in an hour. His office will be empty.”

“I’ll try to get in if I can, but I’ll have to look for an opening. I can’t let anyone see me.”

“Then let me go in.”

“Hannah.”

“If anyone asks, I have a perfectly good reason for being in there.”

“I won’t let you put yourself at risk.” He poured milk into her cup, then put it back in the fridge and left without saying another word.

“This is ridiculous,” she said to herself as she stirred the sugar into her drink.

When she went back to her office, she had no trouble ignoring him.

---

After staring at her computer screen for ten minutes, absorbed by all the reasons Robby was being unreasonable, she decided she was a grown woman who could do what she wanted. Robby wasn’t her boss, and she could go into Pike’s office for a research query if anyone asked. If looking through his files would either exonerate him or implicate him, she needed that for her own peace of mind.

After an hour of checking the time every ten minutes, she forced herself to wait another five minutes before finishing her coffee. Pike was always punctual and would be out of the building by now. On her way back to the kitchen, she’d slip into his office and be in and out in a few short minutes.

Her heart pounded, but she kept a serene look on her face as she walked across the room. She glanced across the cubicles to Robby’s desk and could see the top of his head. She kept an eye on him until she reached Pike’s door where she turned in, then halted, but before she could retreat, Pike looked up after closing his briefcase.

“Hey,” he said.

“Uh.” She looked at her watch. “That’s right, you have a meeting. I forgot.”

He smiled. "You sure? Or were you afraid you'd miss me?"

"No, I—uh. Aren't you going to be late?"

"The meeting got pushed back. I'm leaving now. What is it I can do for you?"

Her mind went blank, so she grasped at the first thing she could think of. "I felt bad that I've put you off about dinner, so I thought I'd see if you want a coffee. But you're leaving."

"You're having another already? You really must be tired. However," He pulled his briefcase off his desk and walked up to her. "I'll take a raincheck on that one too. Now you owe me coffee and dinner. It's adding up quickly." She shifted sideways to get out of his way so he could walk about the door, but he moved with her. "I was thinking. I wouldn't mind going over those reports with you once I'm back in the office."

"Why do you need me to go over the report? It's standard."

"Not the one you just sent me, the ones you shared with the committee about Burma. And I want to know it all. All the information you've got. I'd like to go over it with you."

"Oh, you mean the ones that gave me a great deal of embarrassment?" It made her sick to think that someone in that office, possibly in that meeting, was actively working against all the good she was hoping for.

"It's good work you're doing. Maybe we can come up with a way to help massage things along. I'd like to help if I can."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Why?"

He laughed a cynical huff. "I don't know. Maybe being around you is rubbing off on me. I like how passionate you are about helping those kids. I'm not passionate about much, and I don't like that about myself."

Maybe she'd been wrong to judge him so harshly. "Well, thank you. You certainly have more sway in the group. I'll get the information to you as soon as I can."

"Great." He brushed closer to her than necessary as he went past.

If they could confirm Pike wasn't in on it, maybe they could bring Pike in. He knew more about the inner workings of the company than she did, and it would mean she could keep Robby between them. Pike was getting too bold in his advances.

After Pike disappeared around the corner, her gaze moved sideways to



Robby's desk. He was watching her and gave her an almost imperceptible shake of the head. She gave him back a soft shrug and then turned in to Pike's office, nudging the door almost all the way closed.

---

Robby's teeth ground together as he fought for calm. He couldn't have made himself any more clear if he'd tried. Hannah had deliberately gone against his orders and put herself into a compromising situation. That's what he got for trusting a civilian. It's why working with an experienced team was ideal and why he was hesitant to tell her much about the mission. With his team, everyone knew his part. And as team leader, they followed his orders without question.

He waited a beat, then stood and walked toward Pike's office but veered off at the last second. As frustrated as he was, he had to admit she was right to a point. She was part of Pike's team. No one in the office would take any notice of her in there, but they would notice him. He'd have to ride it out, but he'd make sure she understood she'd let him down.

Detouring toward the bathroom, he made a quick pit stop before returning to his desk via her office, hoping she'd returned, but it was empty, and Pike's door was still in the same position as before.

But before reaching his desk, he saw Pike at the end of the hall. Heading back into the office.

Robby ducked into his cubicle and grabbed a pair of scissors, then changed his mind. He couldn't use force and shouldn't need to. Pike wouldn't attack here, even if he was involved. Instead, he dropped the scissors back on his desk and hurried to Pike's office, putting together a plan as he went. She wasn't going to like it.

Hannah looked up when he entered. "What are you doing in here?"

He hurried toward her. "Trust me."

"I—"

"You need to slap me."

"What?"

"Don't question me, just slap me. Now."

She did, just as Pike entered, and it stung.

"Don't tell me you didn't like it," Robby said, reaching for her. He saw

the recognition in her eyes as she looked between him and Pike. Then she hit his hand away.

“I told you to leave me alone.”

“You play hard to get, but I have a feeling you lured me in here so we could be alone.”

Pike’s hand settled heavily on his shoulder, wrenching him around. “What do you think you’re doing in here?”

Robby pretended to be startled. “Oh. I thought you left.”

“I did. But I forgot something. Lucky for Hannah I did.”

“Look, I didn’t mean anything by it. She’s got a thing for me.”

“I do not. Pike, he’s been trying to pick me up all week.”

“You’ve been giving me mixed signals all week,” Robby said.

“I was not.”

“You said you weren’t worried about him,” Pike said.

“I thought I could handle it. I didn’t want you getting involved.”

“I’m involved now.”

“Hey,” Robby put his hands up. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I wasn’t trying to make trouble.”

“You tried to kiss me.”

“Only because I thought you wanted me to.”

“I came in here to get away from you.”

“I think you should go,” Pike said. “Before I call security. Maybe I should call them anyway.”

“No, hey, it was just a little miscommunication. Won’t happen again. I swear.”

He turned and winked at Hannah, impressed with her performance, although he was pretty sure he’d ruined his undercover op to save her. He’d probably get a call from HR shortly and be escorted from the premises if Pike had any say in the matter. He’d want to impress her and show her he was in charge of the situation.

Pike shoved him. “Don’t look at her. You focus on me.” He stepped up to Robby, who took a step back, pretending to be intimidated. “If you so much as sneeze in her direction, I’ll have you arrested.”

“Yeah, I got it.” He didn’t like letting Pike think he was the big man. “No harm done.”

“That remains to be seen. You’ll be hearing from HR.”

“Great.” He huffed and trudged back to his desk, looking back only once

to see Pike put a hand on Hannah's shoulder. She crossed her arms and looked out the door at him. He mouthed the word 'sorry'. She'd be okay for now, but the event would probably embolden Pike.

---

"I'm sorry, Pike," Hannah said. "I shouldn't have used your office without your permission. I just wanted to get away from him."

"No. Don't apologize. I'm just glad I came back. Forgot one of my files."

"Lucky for me."

"Listen, I've got to get going. I'm late now. But you call me if you need anything."

"I will. But he won't try anything again. Not after that confrontation." She couldn't endure much more of Pike's acute concern. At least she didn't have to make any excuses to get away from him.

"Promise me you'll contact Human Resources and put in a complaint against that dirtbag."

"Maybe he really did misunderstand."

"Trust me, he knew what he was doing. I know guys like that. If he's done it once, he'll do it again. Promise me you'll report it. Otherwise, I will."

"Okay. I promise."

"Good. And remember. Anything at all. You call me."

"Thank you."

For a moment, she was afraid Pike would kiss her before he left, but after he escorted her to her office, he only touched her arm, and she had to resist the urge to shudder at his touch.

She spent the rest of the afternoon in her room with her door closed. It was too dangerous to have any contact with Robby while she was still in the office, but with several hours left in the day, it was an agonizing wait. She was desperate to talk to him after what she had found. At least she could do some research of her own.

Her phone dinged with an incoming message, and she rubbed her forehead. Pike had sent her another text.

He hasn't bothered you again?

Nope. I think you took care of that problem. Thanks again.

Will you have time for that coffee today?

I don't think I'm up for it. I'm a bit shaken. I'm looking forward to going home and going to bed.

Tomorrow then.

It will take me a couple of days to get the information together that you wanted to talk about. I'll let you know when I have everything.

If you insist.

She put her phone aside and pulled out the sheet of paper she'd swiped from the back of Pike's filing cabinet. It contained details about his visit to Burma, which wouldn't be unusual except he'd never mentioned any trip to Burma before and had never shown any interest except for today as an excuse to have coffee with her. Why would he keep it a secret unless he was doing something he knew she wouldn't like?

She closed her eyes to steady herself. If Pike was involved, that meant he'd been playing her the whole time. He kept himself distanced from Burma for a reason, but why would he want to get close to her about it? Why risk letting something slip?

By the end of the day, she was exhausted from her search. Then a knock came at the door, and she quickly turned off her computer screen.

"Yeah?"

The door opened, and Pike ducked in. "I just got back. Wanted to make sure you weren't still too rattled."

"I told you, I'm fine."

"But your door is closed. You never have your door closed."

"I do sometimes, but today I didn't want to have to look at Robby if he walked by."

"He's not here anymore, so either he's gone home or he's been fired. Did you contact HR?"

"Not yet."

"I know you always try to see the good in people, but there's something fishy going on."

"What do you mean?"

"I looked into him."

"What? Why?"

"Because he needed looking into. There are important pieces missing in his file."

“Please, Pike, leave it alone. I don’t want to ruin some poor guy’s life because he thought he had a chance with me.”

“I saw you slap him. It must have been serious.”

“Will you please let me handle it my way?”

“You’re a very stubborn woman. Did you know that?”

“I’ve been told that before, yes.”

“I like that in a woman. Okay, I’ll leave it with you.”

“Thank you.”

“But remember that if you don’t put a complaint on his file, when he leaves here, he can go somewhere else and do the same thing all over again. Is that what you want?”

“I will report him. I promise.”

“All right. You know where I am if you need anything.”

“Actually, I think I might head home. I can’t focus on anything.”

“You’re going now?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me drop my stuff in my office, and I’ll walk you to your car.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I’m trying to be a gentleman here. He could be out there waiting for you.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Maybe *he*’s crazy. Stop trying to act all strong and capable and let me do something nice for you.”

She hated even being in the same room as him, and now she had to walk with him to her car. “Okay.”

---

In the elevator, he stood close. “I hope you get a better night’s sleep tonight.”

“I’m sure I will. I’ve got dinner I can heat up, and then it’s off to bed.”

“Do you really like those reheated dinners?”

“Actually, there are some meals that are better the second time.”

“How can that possibly be true?”

“Because the flavor moves through the meal and enhances it.”

“Give me one dish where that happens.”

“Stew.”

“Stew?”

“Yeah. I love stew.”

The elevator opened, and she hurried off with Pike close behind.

“Hey, slow down. What’s the rush?”

“Sorry.” She slowed. “I just want to get home.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. I can see you’re really rattled, but guys like that are often all bark and no bite. Although, I’m not gonna lie. I kind of wish he would try something. I wouldn’t mind taking a swing at him.”

Hannah wouldn’t have minded him doing it either. Pike wouldn’t stand a chance in a fight against Robby. He was a little taller, but Robby had all the skill.

“A brawl at the office, huh? That would certainly get HR’s attention.”

“We’re not in the office now. I’d have a lot more leeway out here.”

She smiled and let him think it was for him. “My car’s around the block. You don’t have to go all the way out there.”

“It will put my mind at ease.”

She endured more small talk until she was close enough to push the button and unlock the doors. “That’s me. And there’s no Robby. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Hey.” He took her arm to stop her. She wanted to shrink away from his touch but controlled herself. Just a few more seconds and she’d be free. “You look after yourself, okay?”

“I will.”

“And remember —”

“If I need anything, I’ll call.”

He smiled, then leaned in and kissed her cheek. Thank goodness he couldn’t see her grimace. “Sweet dreams.”

“Bye.” She hurried to her car and drove out of the parking lot as fast as she could without looking suspicious. She didn’t know how she’d be able to return to the office. Turning Pike down for his advances was one thing, but knowing he was connected to Burma made her a little afraid of him. If he was capable of that, what else was he capable of?

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## Chapter 15

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HANNAH SCANNED the streets as she drove, looking for any sign of Robby. A car behind her turned with her several times, but on the next left, it went straight. He must know how to find her outside of the office, but she was worried he wouldn't contact her until after the weekend. With everything that had happened, all she wanted was someone to talk to. And by someone, she meant Robby. He could help make sense of everything, and with the way Pike had said goodbye, she needed someone around who she felt safe with. Despite being knocked out and kidnapped by Robby, he was the only person she trusted right now.

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When she parked on the street near her house, the figure on her porch startled her at first until she recognized who it was and smiled with a mix of relief and elation.

After pulling the groceries from her back seat, she stifled the grin as she

climbed the steps. “You look cold. How long have you been out here?”

“Not long. I left right after you did. Wondered what took you so long, but now I see you made a stop on the way.”

“I realized halfway home that I didn’t have any food.”

“I tried to meet you at your car in the city.”

“Ah.”

“I take it Pike insisted.”

“I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. I was afraid to push too hard. Thought it would be better to give in so I could get home.”

Robby took the bag of groceries so she could unlock the door. “I want you to know I was there, waiting until you were safe.”

“Then you saw?”

“The kiss? Yeah. I feel like I’m responsible. I gave him a reason to take more of an interest.”

“No. I mean, he’s never done that before, but it was only a matter of time, I guess.” She stepped inside and flicked on the lights. “Should it make me uncomfortable that you know where I live?”

“It’s standard procedure to gather as much information on a suspect as possible.”

“Have you ever been here before?”

“Just once. I drove by. I wouldn’t even be here now if it wasn’t for that incident today.”

“I saw an opportunity, and I took it.”

“You disobeyed my orders.”

She wrenched the groceries from his arms. “I am under no obligation to do anything you command.”

“This isn’t about obligation. I give orders because they’re necessary to complete the mission, but now it’s been compromised, and I’ve had to pull the plug. I can’t work there anymore.”

“If I don’t make a complaint, it shouldn’t matter.”

“You don’t think Pike will step in?”

“I can distract him.”

“I can’t believe you’d suggest that. That’s the last thing I want you to do.”

“You can’t throw away all our hard work just because I didn’t do what you told me to.”



“All *our* hard work? You put yourself at unnecessary risk. For what? What would you have done if I didn’t come in? It was stupid, and you know it.”

Her mouth dropped open. She hadn’t expected him to be so angry. “I’m sorry, okay? But I did have a plan. I’d already worked out what to do in case things didn’t go the way I expected. You’re the one that butted in. I could have handled it, and you could have kept your job.” She almost stomped her foot but instead took her aggression out on the groceries she pulled out of the bag.

He closed in on her. “What did you expect me to do? You knew I saw you go in there. You should have known that I wouldn’t leave you there if things went sideways.”

“You could have trusted me.”

“I barely know you. How can I trust you?”

“I’ve known you just as long. How can I trust *you*?”

He threw his hands in the air. “This was a bad idea. All of it.”

“Oh yeah? You haven’t even asked me the most important question.”

“Your safety is what’s most important.”

“Is it?”

“What else is there?”

“The mission.”

“What are you saying?”

“You never asked me if I found anything.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah.” She crossed her arms. “But please, feel free to keep scolding me if you want. Or you can be civil, and I can cook us some dinner. You like spaghetti?”

He rubbed his hand across his mouth. “You found something to connect Pike?”

“I don’t know. I need you to look at it. Drink?”

Robby reluctantly settled himself on a stool. “A water would be great.”

After setting the glass in front of him, she collected the extra ingredients she needed from the cupboard and filled a pot with water.

“You’re going to make me wait until after dinner to share your findings?”

“Unless you give me a reason to tell you now.” She smirked.

He tried to hold back his smile, but it slipped out. “I’m sorry. I overreacted. But —”

“Quit while you’re ahead. I accept your apology.” She went to her purse and handed him the paper. “Pike’s been to Burma.”

“Should he not have been?”

“It’s unusual. He knows how invested I am, and yet he’s never mentioned it. In fact, the more I think about it, he’s almost gone out of his way to avoid connecting himself to it in any way. Even in the meetings—any of them—when that country is mentioned, he zones out like he’s uninterested.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. I searched all the travel documents I could find in HR.”

“You accessed private records?”

“Not that private. I have a bit of computer knowhow. Anyway, there were no records attached to this trip at all. Then on his Facebook page for the dates listed there, he put up a post about him skiing in Japan.”

“You’ve been busy today.”

“I told you I would be an asset to this case.”

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you’ve done. But part of my job is to keep you from getting too involved.”

“Since when?”

“Since you convinced me you were innocent.”

“I can look after myself.”

“You don’t understand how much danger you could be in if Pike’s connected.”

“Pike’s not going to hurt me.”

“You don’t know that for sure. And it’s not just him. There will be others involved who have no qualms about removing a threat.”

“Nobody knows, so it’s fine. Now, there was one more thing.”

“What?”

“That’s not Pike’s writing on that sheet. It’s someone else’s.”

“Whose?”

“It looks familiar, but I don’t know. I’ve been wracking my brain, but it’s not coming to me. And I don’t even know where to look. So what do you think? Is this enough to go on?”

“It’s hard to know for certain. You did pretty much exactly what I would have done looking into his travel, but I’ll need more to go on before we can move in on him.”

“Why don’t you knock him out and kidnap him like you did with me?”

“I only did that as a last resort. And if I could go back, I would have

handled it differently.”

“Lucky for Pike.” The onions sizzled in the pan, and Hannah stirred them.

“You’ve got something on your mind,” Robby said. “I can see it.”

“It’s this sudden interest he’s taken in Burma. Why now? If he’s been involved all along, why change things now?”

“It could be as simple as a way to get closer to you. Is it Burma he’s interested in? Or just you?”

“I don’t know, but he asked me for the reports I put together for my presentation. All of them.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s the stuff I shared in the meeting, but he asked to see everything I have.”

“Sounds to me like he wants to know what you know.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

She dumped the ground beef into the pan and stabbed at it. “I can’t believe this is happening. What if the whole fundraising committee is in on this? What if most of TreadCraft is? I’ve been here supporting them and championing what they’re doing.”

“There’s no way you could have known. You did what you thought was right at the time.”

“And what about the donors? All that money they’ve given to help kids, and Pike said they’ve made plans for another—that’s it!”

“What?”

“I know whose handwriting it is on that paper. Henry Burns.”

“The CEO?”

“Yeah. Let me see it again?”

He laid the sheet on the counter, and she studied the writing.

“Come here and stir this. I need to look at something.”

He moved around to the stove as she pulled out her phone. “You know those giant checks that get made for promotional pictures?”

“Yeah.”

“Henry made a big deal about writing out the whole thing himself. Usually it’s printed by a machine—here, see?”

She held up the zoomed-in picture of a gray-haired man holding up a giant check.

Robby lifted the page next to the phone. “Yeah. That looks like it could be a match. I’m no document expert, but I’d say they’re written by the same

person. By the way, your water is boiling.”

“If Henry is involved, that means the whole board could be.”

“If you can finish up dinner, I’ll start doing some searches of my own.”

“You want my laptop?”

“Thanks, yeah.”

He moved to the couch, and she set her computer on the coffee table in front of him. “What is it you’re looking for?”

“I have a few tricks up my sleeve. What’s this?”

“What?”

“The picture you have as your wallpaper.”

“I found that while researching for my presentation. It’s a school TreadCraft built—or I guess—I don’t know. When I put it as my wallpaper, I thought it was a good thing. Now? Who knows?”

“Do you know when it was taken?”

“Almost two months ago, I think. Why?”

“Henry brought back photographs of the school?”

“They look good on the displays.”

“I didn’t see this on the display.”

“No, not this one. Personally, I like the candid shots, but they always use posed ones.”

“Hannah, I know this school. This is the one my team and I raided. It’s where we found the evidence against TreadCraft.”

“That’s *the* school?”

“Yeah, and if these were taken two months ago, there is no way anyone in this picture didn’t know what was really going on. I can’t believe they took photos.”

“It’s possible Henry didn’t even know. He’s not looking at the camera, and they weren’t made public.”

“Then where did you get them?”

“Off one of the guys on the trip.”

“He gave them to you?”

“No, he left the company not long after they returned, so I went into the network and pulled up the deleted stuff because I’d heard him mention something about pictures he’d taken.”

“Do you have any more photos from that time?”

“Yeah. On the desktop is a folder.”

“*Burma photos?*”

“That’s the one. Inside there is a folder with last month’s date on it.”

Robby clicked through the pictures. “Do you know where this photo was taken?”

Hannah looked over his shoulder. “Zoom in there to the right.”

“Here?”

“Yeah. That looks like it. That name there. It’s the closest town to the school.”

“Yeah, I recognize it. That could be their base of operations.”

“Good thing I got those photos, then.”

He placed the computer on the table and turned to her. “Hannah.”

“Yeah?”

“These photos. Did you use any of them in your presentation?”

“Uh...oh. Yeah. That one of the school.”

Robby slowly stood from the couch and walked to the window, standing to the side as he pulled back the curtain a crack.

“Do you think someone’s out there?” she said.

“What’s your backyard like?”

“It needs a mow. Why?”

“I don’t think anyone was supposed to know about those pictures. In that meeting, you showed everyone that you had them. Do you know the name of the employee that left?”

“Dominic Baker. Why?”

“I’m going to get my team to look into him.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “You don’t think—I heard he got a job in D.C.”

“He probably did. But I’d like to know for sure.”

“You think they’re worried I know too much?”

“It would explain Pike’s sudden interest. But that’s a good thing. If Pike’s coming in from the angle of getting close to you, that means they don’t yet believe you’re a threat.”

“So I’m safe?”

“For now, but someone is out there watching your house. I thought I noticed the last time I was here, but figured I was being overcautious.”

“And you’re sure I’m safe?”

“Mostly.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

“It’s when they disappear that you have to worry. But with what we’ve

put together, especially with the photographic evidence, I think it will be enough to move on. With what we know about Henry, my team and I can go in and find out what's there."

"You can do that? You can just go into Henry's house? Wouldn't you need a search warrant or something?"

"Not Henry's house. Their operation in Burma. We've been hired to stop the militia, and this will certainly help."

"That's great news. I'm coming."

"This again?"

"You didn't want my help at the office, and it turned out I was invaluable. You need me on this."

"No, I don't. What I need is for you to return to work as if nothing has happened. Go to Pike and tell him you're worried because it looked like someone was watching your house, and you're afraid it's me. Meet him somewhere in public to talk about Burma, and make sure he knows you know nothing."

"Wouldn't it be better if I go to work and search for more information?"

"No. That's the last thing you should do."

"How am I supposed to go back in there like nothing has happened? To actually spend quality time with Pike knowing that he's been involved."

"Because that's what I need from you. If they suspect anything, we could risk losing the ground we've gained."

"Before you turned up, I was perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

"You mean like working for this marvelous company who supports the militias in Burma? Is it even the children you're wanting to help? Or is this all to make you feel better about what happened in your past?"

She opened her mouth in a surprised squeak, and Robby closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. That was uncalled for." He ran his hand through his hair as he ambled across the room and fell into a chair. "I'm not used to being challenged."

"I guess I bring out the worst in you."

"It's not you."

"It's not? Because it sure sounds like it."

"It's nothing. Forget it."

But it was clear to Hannah that it was far from nothing. The pain that was etched across his face was a familiar one. He had a past that haunted him, and

she was bringing it to the surface.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“You have nothing to apologize for. That’s on me.”

He looked at her and she saw something in his eyes that drew her to him, but she stayed in place.

“I pushed you too hard.”

“Actually, the truth is, Hannah, you inspire me.”

She laughed. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“No. I’m used to being around a trained group who are solely focused on the mission. We do our job because that’s what we’re hired to do. It makes the operation run smoothly, but you’re different. You’re willing to risk your life because you care. That’s the one thing that’s trained out of us.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. We can’t afford to feel.”

“But you do care. You want to protect those kids because you care about them.”

“Not just them. You’re one of the vulnerable who is being taken advantage of. I’m supposed to keep you safe too, and you won’t let me do that. I don’t know how to work with that.”

She nodded slowly, trying to untangle what he had just said. “So you don’t think we’re in imminent danger right now?”

“No. If they were going to move, they would have by now. They’re just watching.”

“Then how about we have dinner, and then we can decide what to do next? I’m starving.”

“Yeah, okay. As long as you’re a good cook.” He cracked a smile.

“You’ll have to let me know. I like my cooking, but it’s not often I cook for someone else.”

His schoolboy charm mixed with the confidence of a man who knew how to handle himself—yet a selfless care for the weak—made it hard to fill her mind with the important things they were facing. The one thing that helped was to remind herself that he had no interest in God. There was no way she’d ever consider getting involved with a guy whose most important thing in life wasn’t the same as hers. The best way forward with Robby was to remain professional.

As she set the table, she asked God for wisdom. She knew she could be hardheaded when she shouldn’t, and her passion to save the kids could be

pushing her too hard in the wrong direction.

*Please don't let me make a mistake. Or, if I do, don't let the consequences be too hard to undo.*



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## Chapter 16

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THE CONVERSATION during dinner was pained at first. The draw Robby felt toward Hannah caught him off guard, and he kept the conversation formal at the start, but it wasn't long before they'd both relaxed.

"Isn't that thirds for you?" he said when she dished herself up another bowlful.

"Turns out all this undercover work has built up my appetite. I expected it to do the opposite."

He shook his head but followed suit with another helping for himself. He hadn't known women like Hannah even existed in the world, not that he'd done much looking. Having a family of his own was a nice idea in theory, but he could never picture himself actually settling down. Not yet anyway.

But he wished he could blame the churning in his stomach on only his attraction to her. Unfortunately, he couldn't deny that it pointed to something much more unnerving. His growing feelings were bad enough, but he'd rather that over what he knew was really the cause of his unease. God. Ever since he'd found out she was a Christian, it was like God was putting an

exclamation point on everything that had to do with her, and he had no idea what it meant.

He'd spent a lot of his adult life trying hard to stay angry at whatever higher power might exist in the heavenlies. It was easy to blame a power greater than yourself. Believing that God wanted the bad and not the good made the bad stuff easier to bear. He wanted to believe that God was an angry father waiting for an opportunity to be disappointed. That was a God he could understand. But that's not what he saw with Hannah.

"What do we do now?" she said as she carried the plates to the kitchen.

"Let me do that." Robby jumped up and took the dishes from her hands.

"You sure?"

"Yup." He rolled his sleeves and searched below the sink for the dish soap. "Go sit down and put your feet up."

"I won't be relaxed enough to put my feet up until those people outside my house are gone. How about I dry?"

"Suit yourself. But you may as well get used to it. They'll still be here while you sleep."

"I hope you're not suggesting I stay here tonight. I'll be freaked out all night knowing they're there."

"I don't want to alert them to anything being wrong. What if I stay the night? I can sleep on the couch."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course. It's what we do in this kind of situation."

"All part of the job, huh?"

"And don't worry. This will all be over soon enough."

"Then tell me this. Once you're in Burma, where I can't go with you, how am I supposed to stay safe in my house and at work?"

"I've got someone who can stay with you. Or, once you convince Pike you're not involved, take some time off. Tell them that, after that creep Robby hit on you at work, you need a break."

"Won't they follow me wherever I go?"

"I can get you away from here without them knowing where you went. I doubt they have the required connections to follow you besides in your car. And once we have what we need in Burma, they'll have much bigger worries than you."

"That's mildly comforting."

"All you have to do is pick somewhere you don't usually go. No

emergency contacts or Facebook friends you connect with much. Not that there are many.”

“How do you know that?”

“That’s the first place I looked, just like you did with Pike. It will be one of the main places they’ll watch for you.”

“Should I do what Pike did and post photos of me somewhere I’m not?”

“Better not, just in case they check. Then they’ll become suspicious.”

“What about you? What’s your Facebook page look like?”

“Don’t have one. Not with the job I do. You won’t find anything on me in any search engine.”

“Challenge accepted.”

He laughed. “Go for it. But I’m warning you in advance, you’re wasting your time.”

“No social media at all?”

“None whatsoever.”

“What about others? Someone may have posted something on you.”

“No one I spend any time with has a social media profile.”

“Except me.”

“You barely use it.”

“How’d you get involved in this kind of work, anyway?”

“I was recruited from special forces.”

“Huh. I have a friend who is ex-special forces. Peter Black. He retired a long time ago, though.”

“How do you know him?”

“He did some work for my dad. He was incredible. I know you guys are highly trained, but the stuff he could do...maybe it was God.”

“God?”

“Yeah. I’d almost go so far as to say that his faith was stronger than my dad’s, and that’s saying something.”

“You think God gave your friend special powers?”

“I think he allowed God to use him in extraordinary ways. And because Peter was always obedient, God did some miraculous things through him.”

Robby sucked on his tooth. That comment about obedience both got under his skin and intrigued him. It was crazy to think that God could use a guy like him to do something beyond his own abilities. “What’s he doing now?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t talked to him in years. He’s probably out saving

people somewhere. I remember he wasn't the type to sit still for very long."

"I know the feeling. Now that we're all cleaned up, I'll give my team a call and let them know where we're up to. Start getting our trip to Burma organized."

"I'd still like you to reconsider my coming along."

"Would it make you feel better if I said I'd think about it?"

"Is that the truth?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Really? Thank you. Consider the fact that I was a local for a long time. I know the people and the area. I can speak some of the language, although I'm probably a little rusty."

"You're really trying to sell this."

"I really want to come."

"I'll make that call."

Robby went to the window after he dialed and checked through the blinds. He swore when Holland answered.

"What did I do?" Holland said with a laugh.

"Hey Holland. Sorry. We had someone watching the front of Hannah's house."

"Had?"

"They've just driven off down the street."

"Maybe they're taking a break."

Robby huffed. "Yeah, right. Listen, I need you guys to get ready for a trip back to Burma. I was going to go over it with you now, but just in case, I think we should clear out of here."

"Can't do it, I'm afraid. Fletcher's put us onto another case."

"When?"

"As of yesterday."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because it's urgent. After the non-event the other night, he thought you could keep working on your own for now. I don't think he was expecting another trip overseas."

"I don't think it can wait, but I'll have to sort it out later. I've got to get Hannah out of here. I'll be in touch."

"I'm about to go offline."

"Right now?"

"Yeah, you caught me just in time."

“The whole team?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. I’ll figure something out. Talk when you’re back.”

Robby pulled his gun and returned to Hannah, who was in the kitchen making coffee.

“Don’t worry. It’s decaf,” she said, then she saw the gun. “What’s wrong?”

“They’re not out the front anymore.” He pulled her away from the window before turning off the light.

“Maybe they gave up.”

“Or maybe they got new orders. I’m not taking any risks. Stay low and behind me.”

She crouched and followed him to the back door. The door handle rattled before they got there.

“Don’t make a sound, no matter what,” he ordered. “And don’t move until I say.” He hurried across the room to the other side of the door and waited.

When he looked back at Hannah, she was pressed against the cupboard with her hands clamped across her mouth. When she saw him looking at her, she widened her eyes. He smiled to reassure her, then focused back on the rattling door. It clicked, and the handle turned.

Robby waited until the intruder had moved through the door before he kicked it. A man grunted, and a gun went off.

Robby rolled, shooting through the door as he went.

“Sorry about that,” he said to Hannah when he crouched beside her. She still had her hands over her mouth.

Another shot was fired, and she cried out a muffled protest as he moved to cover her.

“One of your neighbors will call the cops,” he said, firing another round. “We only have to hold them off until the sirens. They won’t want to be caught here.”

Robby pushed Hannah back farther into the room when a bullet lodged above their heads.

The door moved again, and he shot at it.

“Do you think you hit any of them?” she whispered when several minutes went by without any more action.

“Probably. They weren’t expecting any armed resistance, but we’ll stay

low until the police arrive.”

After several more tense minutes, the sirens brought relief.

“We’ll give them a minute to arrive, then I’ll clear out.”

“Shouldn’t we tell them what happened?”

He turned to her. “Yeah. You stay here, but don’t tell them anything beyond what happened tonight. Only share enough so they know to keep you safe. Don’t mention me or Burma or TreadCraft.”

“Wait. No. If you’re not staying, I’m not.”

“Hannah. Those guys are coming after you now. For whatever reason, they’ve decided you’re a threat, and that’s not going to change until we stop them.”

“I’ll be safe with you. I won’t be in the way. Please.”

He paused for a second, then said. “No. You need to stay here.”

“I won’t.”

“You’d make me tie you up?”

“Fine. I’ll stay, but I’ll tell them everything.”

“You’re not serious.”

“I am.”

“You’re blackmailing me to get your own way? But you’ll ruin the mission.”

“I’m trusting that you want this as much as I do. If I tell the police, they can look into it. I’ve got the evidence to give to them. They can get search warrants. They can look more deeply into what Henry’s been doing.”

“Hannah.”

“I’ve made up my mind, and it sounds like the police are very close now. You shouldn’t need me to tell you this, but your best course of action is to take me with you. I won’t stay here.”

She could hear God’s warning voice but ignored it.

He shook his head. “Fine. Then you’re coming to D.C., but you’re staying there.”

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## Chapter 17

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“WHAT IS THIS PLACE?” Hannah asked when Robby opened the door to a small townhouse in the outer suburbs of the nation’s capital.

He walked to the end of the hall, checking the rooms before he finally stopped and answered her. “It’s a bit of everything. For you, it’s a safe house. But it has other uses. Mostly, we’re here to regroup.”

“Is this where we’re staying?”

“This is where you’re staying while I’m away, so make yourself comfortable.” He nodded toward a shabby-looking couch. “It looks—uh—well used, but it’s the most comfortable thing I’ve ever sat on.”

“Is this where you’re meeting your team? Do I get to meet them? You’ve barely said a word to me since we left my place.”

“That’s because I’m still figuring things out.”

“I thought you already did.”

“Yeah, well. My guys have been given another assignment.”

“What? Why? This one isn’t even done yet.”

“I know, but it was urgent.”

“So is this.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“That settles it.”

“Settles what?”

“You’ll have to use me.”

Robby closed his eyes and sighed before focusing back on her. “You know that’s not going to happen. Not ever.”

“You said you’d think about it.”

“And I have.”

“You have not. Not really.”

“If there was any reason that could possibly warrant you coming to Burma, that’s one thing, but you are not the person I need on this mission. All you would do is be a distraction.”

“That’s all I am to you? A distraction?”

He stepped up to her. He needed her to understand without voicing how he felt and make things more complicated than they already were. He looked down at her lips. It wasn’t the first time he’d wanted to kiss her in the last twenty-four hours, but he had enough self-control to resist even in this moment. When he lifted his eyes to hers, he saw her pupils were dilated and knew they were on the same page, so he stepped back.

“Oh,” she said softly. “That kind of distraction. I didn’t—um. Okay.”

“And I need qualified people.” He went to the window and looked out, not because he was worried someone was there, but because he needed distance from her.

“But can you at least understand my position on this? Why I want this so bad?”

“I do. I get it. Trust me.”

“How many people do you need to make up a team?”

“Why? Do you have a team standing by, looking for something to do?”

“What if you had one other person? Would that be enough?”

“Hannah, I told you —”

“Not me. I get that you...need people who are capable of whatever it is you’ll be doing. Could you get by with one?”

“I guess if they had the right skillset.”

“What skills specifically?”

“We’ll try to get in and out without anyone knowing. Or at least, not knowing until it’s too late, so they’d need to know how to do that.”



“Is that it?”

“They’d need to be good in close combat. Not just fighting but weapons as well.”

“Let me make a call.”

“Hang on a second. Who do you know that fits that profile?”

“Peter.”

“Who?”

“I told you, Peter Black.”

“The old guy?”

“He’s not that old, he’s just retired. I’m sure he’s kept himself sharp.”

“You’re sure?”

“It can’t hurt to ask.”

“I’m not happy about bringing someone in I don’t know.”

“What other options do we have? We don’t have much time to move on this. Once they know I’m alive, who knows what changes they’ll make.”

Robby turned a frustrated circle before he came back to stand in front of her. “Okay. You can call him, but I’m not making any promises.”

“You won’t regret it. He’s the best there is. I promise.”

“We’ll see.”

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Peter stood at the threshold of Jemi’s room. She was almost never awake anymore. When she was, she always tried to smile for him, and it broke his heart. Every time.

Part of him wanted her to let go of life and be free of the pain, but another part of him couldn’t bear to be without her. Even this shell that remained.

He stepped into the room, his stocking feet sinking into the thick carpet.

After taking her bony hand in his, he knelt beside the bed, running a finger gently along her fragile skin. Tears spilled down his cheeks. Every time he cried, he thought he’d run out, but the tears kept coming.

“I don’t know how to do this anymore, God. I’ve prayed every prayer and given her over to you a thousand times, but nothing changes. The weight only gets heavier. I don’t know how a heart can continue to break into smaller and smaller pieces.”

His phone rang in the other room, and he closed his eyes, pushing more

tears down his cheek.

*Answer it.*

The voice whispered in his mind, but he was too tired to stand. He was too tired to speak to anyone anymore. The only reason he kept going was because he'd discovered that giving up hope took more strength than hanging onto it. He was just so tired.

The ringing stopped, and he rested his head on the side of the bed. The doctors said it could be any day now. Her body was done fighting. He couldn't do anything else for her, but he couldn't give her up.

"There's still time, God. Please. Save her." The words had passed his lips a thousand times, so they barely held any meaning any more.

He used to daydream about the day she would be healed and how he would respond. She would run into his arms, and he would scoop her up, swinging her around as they rediscovered life together.

His phone dinged with a message.

*Go.*

He lifted Jemi's fingers and kissed them. "I'll be right back, my love."

It took him a minute to push himself to standing. Then, he trudged into the living room. He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't obeyed God's voice, but the weariness of continued obedience was a weight almost too heavy to carry. And whoever was on the phone couldn't give him what he wanted. What he needed.

Still...he obeyed.

He listened as the voicemail connected, looking out into the yard where he used to sit with Jemi before she was confined to her bed.

"Hey, Peter. This is Hannah. Uh...Hannah Reynolds. I know it's been a long time, but I really need your help."

He dropped the phone away from his ear. His stomach clenched in anger and frustration. It wasn't Hannah's fault. He'd always liked her. Even when he knew her as a girl, when he'd worked with her dad, he'd seen a fire in her and had expected great things from her. After her dad died, he'd chased her up a few times, both him and Jemi, but it wasn't long before they'd lost contact. She moved on with her life, but now she needed his help. The problem was, when he'd met Jemi, she'd reminded him of Hannah.

He moved to a chair and sat, resting his elbows on his knees. He'd helped so many over the years, and now, when he needed help the most, God was silent about it, instead pushing him to help another.

“What if I say no, God? What difference will it make to me?”

*It will make a difference to me.*

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t leave her. I won’t leave Jemi while she’s—” Fear gripped his stomach in a tight clamp, and he ran back to his wife’s room. But he found her still sleeping. The same shallow puffs lifting her chest. For a moment, he’d been certain God had taken her so he would go help.

*You’ve entrusted everything to me. But not this. Never this.*

“What are you talking about?” His throat was tight in desperation. “I’ve given her to you over and over and over again. I don’t know how else to do it.”

*Have you? Have you really trusted me with her?*

“I don’t want to lose her.”

*Whoever gives up anything in my name...*

“I know.” His heart pounded with the words that had been resonating there for months, but he refused to give voice to them.

He looked at Jemi. How sick and frail she was. That was never how she was meant to be. She should be fierce and strong. Was he the one who’d taken that away from her? Was it his refusal to let her go that made her stay here sick when God wanted to take her home? It was more likely that Jemi refused to go because she knew it would hurt him so much, and she was waiting for him to let go.

He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned close to her ear. “You’ve always been stronger than me. I don’t want to cause you any more pain. God gave you to me as a gift. You have been an amazing part of my life, but you never belonged to me. You were always His.”

Something released inside of him, but it was a scary freedom that he resisted. It caused him to regret saying the words out loud. He knew it was right, but letting go filled him with too much fear.

“God help me. I can’t do it. How can I let her go?”

*Hannah’s message.*

He looked at the phone that he’d dropped at the end of the bed. What could she say that would make any difference? It wouldn’t cost him anything to listen.

While holding Jemi’s hand, he called his voicemail again.

“It’s about Burma,” Hannah continued. “I found out someone has been not only exploiting the kids there but helping a militia who have been oppressing the surrounding villages. We know who might be involved, but

we need help. I know this is out of the blue, and we haven't spoken for a long time, so I don't even know if you're in a position to, but if you can help at all, please, call me back."

Peter ended the call.

*Go.*

He didn't need God to speak into his heart on the matter. He already knew what was required. But Jemi wasn't expected to last the week. How could he go now? He studied her face, trying to remember what it used to look like when her cheeks and eyes weren't sunken. She had always been a beautiful woman, but it was her spirit that had captured him. He missed talking to her and sharing his world with him.

*Will you trust her with me?*

"I don't know if I can."

*Go.*

"Will you keep her alive until I get back?"

*Go!*

He made a noise between a whimper and a growl but leaned into Jemi and kissed her forehead. "I love you, my darling. You mean the world to me, and I know I can leave you in no better care than the Father's." He almost requested she hang on until he got back, but he resisted the urge.

"Please, God. Look after her."

With his heart in a vise, he went into the other room to call Hannah back. It was impossible to ignore God's command. He'd trained it into himself over the years and didn't know any other way to function. He'd spent his whole life leaning not on his own understanding no matter how much it hurt or what it cost him.

"Hi Hannah, it's Peter. Whatever you need. I'm there."

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## Chapter 18

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ROBBY PACED the room with his arms tightly crossed, compressing his chest in indecision. How he'd let Hannah talk him into involving a man he didn't know was beyond him.

"Will you stop," Hannah said. "You're making me nervous."

"That makes two of us."

"I already told you, you can say no if you're not happy with him once he gets here."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do you always get everything you want?"

"Of course not. If I did, I'd be coming to Burma."

"I don't think this is a good idea. We can wait for my team."

"Even though you said before we couldn't?"

"I don't know anything about this guy."

Hannah walked cautiously to Robby and untangled his arms.

"What are you doing?"

She held his hands and looked him in the eye. He forced himself to keep his focus on her eyes and not allow them to drift. He'd avoided kissing her so far, but the longer they were alone together, the harder it was becoming.

"When you meet Peter, you can ask him about his qualifications and get a feel for him. If you still aren't comfortable using him, then don't. It's that simple."

"Why are you suddenly nice to me? There's a catch here somewhere. I can feel it."

"I can see you're not handling this well."

He pulled his hands out of her grip and walked to the other side of the room. She was the reason he wasn't handling it well, but he was trained for this. Whether deep down it was Hannah or her connection to God shouldn't matter.

"What else can we do?" she said. He could hear the frustration in her voice. She was trying to help.

"No. You're right. It will be fine. I'll meet him. If we're all fine with each other, it will be fine."

"What's the problem? What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing."

"You're agitated over something. Is it me? I know I drive you nuts. I have a tendency to push too hard, and it gets me in trouble. It's just that I desperately want to stop these guys. Those poor kids over there —"

"No, it's not you." He clasped his hands on top of his head. "I don't—" He thought of her faith and how she was prepared to give up everything. "Do you really think God wants you involved in this?"

"That's what's bothering you?"

Maybe. "No. I'm changing the subject. Do you?"

She thought for a minute. "It wouldn't be the first time my stubbornness got in God's way, but I've been praying a lot."

"And?"

She shrugged. "I'm not really sure. I know I haven't handled myself this whole time the way He wants, but I don't think I'm too far off base."

"How do you know you've done something wrong?"

"He's warned me a few times."

"So you don't think He wants you here?"

"That's not it either. So far, when I get my head in the right place, God seems to be leading me *to* you. Not away from you. I haven't acted the right

way the whole time, but I don't think we're on the wrong path."

"Can you give me an example?"

"You're going to make me confess my sins?"

"I just want to understand where you're coming from."

"Remember when you were terrorizing me?"

"When did I ever do that?"

"What else do you call assault, kidnapping, interrogation, and threats?"

He laughed. "It wasn't that bad—" He remembered back to that day. "No. I have no excuse. I'm sorry." Fear was a powerful tactic that'd he'd employed and now regretted. "Actually, you handled that all surprisingly well. I was hard on you, but you remained very determined. You were more angry than scared from what I saw."

"That's because I was. But that was God's doing. I mean. Don't get me wrong. There were times when I was afraid."

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. It was partly my own fault."

"No, it wasn't."

"He told me to come clean with you. He wanted me to tell you everything, and I wouldn't."

"You're serious? God told you to trust me?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"If you told me everything, you'd have to trust me."

"It's not about trusting you. It's about trusting God."

"Still, I should have treated you differently."

"It doesn't matter. Like I said, it wasn't about you, it was about God. I was so mad and frustrated at you that I refused. I was stubborn, and it made more trouble than was necessary."

He scratched his head. "Yeah. I guess so. I would have been more inclined to believe you if you'd cooperated."

"At least I finally got around to it."

"And what about when you went into Pike's office after I told you not to? Did God tell you to do that?"

"No idea."

"How can you not know?"

"Because it's not always clear. A lot of things can interfere, and then I get things wrong, and I feel like it's impossible to know what He's saying. It worked out in the end, but I don't know if that was God protecting my

stupidity or if I was walking His path.”

“But you’re saying there are times you don’t know.”

“Oh, yeah, plenty. Like that meeting where I tried to get more funding for Burma. It was a disaster, but I thought I was doing what God wanted.”

“Maybe you were.”

“You weren’t in the meeting.”

“Could God have used that for a purpose you didn’t know about at the time?”

“Like what?”

“All of this that’s happening now. If it wasn’t for that presentation, we wouldn’t have the pictures we needed.”

She frowned. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

He shook his head. “We’re like two sides of the same coin.”

Her face flattened in skepticism. “I don’t see it.”

“Your obstinance draws you closer to God. Mine pushes me farther away.”

She sat on the couch and folded her hands in her lap. “I think part of the problem people have is they expect the world to be fair. But God’s kingdom has nothing to do with fair. I mean, look at what the Bible says about marriage, which is a great illustration of our connection to Jesus. My mom and dad used to talk about it all the time when I was a kid.”

“You’ll have to enlighten me. I have no idea.”

“You’ve never heard it said about wives submitting to their husbands?”

“That’s really a Bible thing? Huh. Okay, how do you reconcile that? I can’t see you submitting to anyone.”

“Yeah, well, God often asks me to do things I don’t want to do, remember? But if you read the whole passage, it also says that husbands are to love their wives as Jesus loved the church and sacrificed His life for them. God’s saying that it’s about both parties laying down everything for each other, not trying to make anything fair. I submitted to God when I gave my life to Him, but not before He gave his life for me. We screwed up this world and separated ourselves from God, not the other way around.”

“So now we have to fix it.”

“No. We’re hopeless. That’s the whole point. He’s the one who fixed it. Jesus sacrificed himself because He was the only one who could fix it. Then God raised him back to life. We should die for the mess we made, but God made a way so we don’t have to. The world’s broken, yes, but God’s the only



answer. You can try all you want with your fancy guns and interrogation skills, but it won't fix anything. It's all for nothing without Jesus. When I was in Burma, we helped the people there, but it wasn't just about getting them an education or feeding them. The whole point was to bring an everlasting result, beginning with showing the people God's love. All we can do is bring temporary relief. Only God has real value to give them."

"That's depressing."

"I don't mean to minimize everything you'd done to help people. But if our ultimate destiny is death, wouldn't you want to be a part of stopping that?"

"You make a convincing argument."

"Do I? You don't look convinced."

Hannah's phone dinged.

"Saved by the bell."

"This isn't over." She grinned, then looked at her phone. "That's Peter. He's out front. Am I allowed to let him in?"

"Why not?"

---

Hannah could see in Robby's face what he thought when Peter entered. It was the same thing she thought. Her confidence in him slipped as soon as she opened the door.

Peter was in his sixties, but he looked older, and he looked tired. She'd always known him to be confident and unstoppable, but all she saw now was a heavy weariness that made him look like he'd been carrying around the weight of the world.

"Hi, Peter. I'm Robby." Robby's smile was polite, and he looked down at their hands when they shook. Even though his face brightened when he smiled, Hannah knew Robby would take more convincing before he'd entrust himself to this man, and so would she.

"Thank you for coming." She hugged him. "Are you well? You look tired."

"I am. But I'm here to give you one hundred percent, although I can tell by the look on your friend's face he's not so sure."

"It's nothing personal," Robby said.

“Don’t worry. I don’t take it personally. You’re special forces, aren’t you?”

“Hannah told you?”

“No, I can tell by looking. I’ve been in this game a long time.”

“Hannah said you were in the special forces as well.”

“I was. And even after that, I continued to do similar work around the world. But despite my extensive resume, I know how I look. It’s been a rough year, and I’ve been beaten down more than I care to admit.”

“You don’t look that bad,” Hannah said.

“You don’t have to lie for my sake. The whole way here, I’ve been trying to figure out what to say to persuade you that I’m the right man for the job.”

“Come up with anything?” Robby said.

“Telling you God sent me isn’t going to work, is it?”

Robby’s eyes flicked to Hannah, then back. “You’re a Christian?”

“I sure am.”

“I should have known. And you’re right, that argument might satisfy her, but it will take more than that with me. We’ll be putting our lives on the line, and I need to be confident I can trust you.”

“Robby,” Hannah said. “You told me you’d give him a chance.”

“It’s fine,” Peter said. “He’s absolutely right to be cautious. Don’t worry. Robby, if the tables were turned, I’d respond the same way. Even more so if the guy walked in saying God sent him. That always makes me wary.”

“But you’re a Christian.”

“Yeah. And I’ve seen a lot of Christians do very unchristian things in the name of God.”

Robby sighed. “Is that all you came up with? Or did you stumble upon something else?”

“I hope so. But even if it doesn’t change your mind, it’s important that I tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

Peter took a beat before he spoke. “God wanted me to tell you to stop blaming your brother. His heart was hurting so badly, he didn’t know what else to do.”

Robby’s jaw tightened, and it looked like he’d stopped breathing. Hannah’s eyes moved between the two men, unsure of what was going on.

“Also,” Peter continued. “Jesus didn’t let him die alone.”

“How—How can you know that? How do you know about Colin?”

“I don’t know anything. But God wanted you to know. Colin didn’t want to go in the end, but it was too late.”

“Then why—” He turned away as tears filled his eyes.

“Why didn’t God let him live?” Peter looked up at the ceiling, fighting with his own emotions. “I don’t know. I’ve struggled to accept when God’s ways are different from mine a lot this year. There’s no easy answer. All I can say is that he had to face the consequences of his actions. But he still had time to choose Jesus, and in the end, only eternity matters. So maybe God didn’t save him in this lifetime, but He did in the next.”

Robby pressed his palms against the wall to hold himself up.

Hannah prayed silently. She didn’t know what God was doing, but it was something big.

“You’ve lost someone?” Robby finally said when he found his voice. “You sound like you know.”

“My wife, Jemi.”

“Jemi’s dead?” Hannah said.

“Not yet.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “But it will be any day if God doesn’t intervene. She’s been battling cancer. The doctors have said she’s close to the end.”

“Why are you here? You should have said something. You should be home with her.”

“Don’t you think I know that?!” Peter clamped his mouth shut, then he started sobbing and dropped to the floor.

Hannah hurried to kneel beside him as Robby stood with his hands at his side, watching.

“God told me to come,” Peter said through his tears. “I’m so sorry, Hannah. I tried. I thought I could do this, but I can’t hold it together any longer. I’m only here to be obedient, but I’m in no state to help. I don’t know why God wanted me to come. I thought He would make me okay by the time I arrived, but it hurts so much. Being away from Jemi is tearing me apart.”

“You should go back. You don’t have to be here.”

“Stop,” he said, covering his head. “I didn’t want to come. I didn’t want to. I had to. Please, God. I can’t. I can’t do this. I’m sorry. I can’t do it. What were you thinking bringing me here? What have I done?”

---

Robby was stunned. He'd always hurt for the loss of his brother, but seeing Peter's anguish opened his eyes to another level of pain. But the resistance was the same. Everyone had that place. That broken place. Even this man Peter, where they reached a point within themselves that they refused to relinquish. Just in case...in case God wasn't the truth after all. In case there was no one but themselves to rely on.

And then the truth hit him so hard, he staggered back against the wall. He saw and understood for the first time how immense Jesus' sacrifice was. He was a man who held nothing back, knowing full well that humanity would struggle endlessly to do the same. And yet, He still did it. Not only that, but He took Peter from his wife when he was filled with so much grief and pain, and God did it to show Robby how much He loved him.

"He leaves the ninety-nine to save the one," Hannah murmured as she rubbed Peter's back.

Her words pulled Robby from his stupor. "What did you say?"

She looked up at him, her eyes rimmed red. "What?"

"What did you just say?"

"I don't know. I was praying. I don't know what I was saying."

"You said 'He leaves the ninety-nine to save the one.'"

"Oh. Yes. I was remembering a scripture. It just popped into my head, so I repeated it." She leaned back onto her heels. "Are you okay? I didn't even think—After what Peter said to you, I should have asked."

"There's so much suffering in the world."

"There is."

"I get it now."

"What?"

"What you said before about needing to believe in God because of all the brokenness in the world. That there is a God out there in control. A God who loves in a way we can't begin to understand. And yet He remains perfectly just. He didn't leave my brother alone even though Colin had to face the consequences of his actions, but Jesus still reached out to him. I don't know if everyone gets that chance right at the end, but the depth of my gratitude for my brother... He's after all of us, all our lives. I understand now."

"You believe it?"

"It's so obvious I don't know how I couldn't see it before."

Peter sat up, wiping the tears as his face lit with a smile. Then his body started to shake. It started as small puffs of air that grew into a chuckle and

then a belly laugh. “I didn’t know.” He wiped his eyes as his laughter died down. “I couldn’t see.”

“See what?” Hannah said. “Are you okay?”

“He did this. God did it, and I was—I couldn’t see it, but that’s what He does.” Peter stood and lifted his hands, hooting as he spun in a slow circle with his eyes closed and face pointed at the ceiling. “Great is our God and worthy to be praised.”

“Something’s wrong,” Robby whispered to Hannah.

Hannah smiled, then laughed as tears spilled from her eyes. “No. Everything’s right. That’s what freedom looks like after you’ve been carrying the weight of the world. It’s not the first time I’ve seen it. The relief is so immense you don’t care about anything or anyone else. Don’t worry. He’ll settle down. But right now, it’s all about him pouring his heart out to God.”

Robby pressed a hand to his chest. He might not be ready to react like Peter, but he could understand a little of that freedom. He couldn’t remember feeling so light.

“His ways are higher than mine,” Peter continued, “I see you, God. I understand. Thank you.” His mouth kept moving in prayer, but he didn’t make another sound. Just stood with his arms in the air and his eyes closed.

“Uh...” Robby beckoned Hannah closer.

“I told you, he’s okay.”

“No, it’s not that,” he said softly. “It’s about what I said about myself before. About believing. Does that mean I’m a Christian now?”

She beamed. He’d never seen her look so happy.

“The Bible says if you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, then yes. You are.”

“I do. I believe it.”

She hugged him tightly, and he wrapped his arms around her, resting his face against her head. Was life ever supposed to feel this good? He continued to hold her until his lips moved to her hair and he wanted to lift her face to his. This wasn’t the time.

He pulled back, holding her away from him, not yet willing to let go, and said, “That’s what Peter meant. He realized it before I fully did. That God brought him here for me.”

“Yeah.”

He could see she wanted to draw closer again, but she cleared her throat and moved to the couch. Robby joined her but left some space between them.

“I’ve found it so hard to open my heart to God,” he said. “But He found the one way to get in there. I still feel bad that He took Peter from his wife.”

“Don’t be. God is big enough to look after all the moving parts. And it wasn’t just for you.” She nodded toward Peter. “It’s what *he* needed too.”

“Why?”

“You saw how much it hurt him to be here, even though God asked him to come. He’s probably been so focused on her, he hasn’t been able to get his head above water. That’s what this did.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Yeah. God’s crazy sometimes. Or at least that’s how it looks to us.”

“I guess. But I will say, I like being on this side of crazy a lot better than the alternative.”

“Welcome to the family.”

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## Chapter 19

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HANNAH SMILED at Robby when Peter snorted in his sleep. He had eventually sat on the floor against the couch without saying a word to anyone but with a relaxed smile on his face. He'd leaned his head back and almost immediately fallen asleep.

"That's probably the best sleep he'll have in a long time, despite the kink his neck will have," Hannah said.

"Do you think God will heal Jemi?"

"I don't know. But I think this is the first time Peter has felt any kind of relief from the worry of it. He's finally given himself fully to God's plan. Whatever that is. It doesn't mean he won't grieve if he loses her, but he'll be okay."

"You know, when he first arrived looking like the shell of a man, I thought there was no way I'd entrust my life into his hands. But I can see it now, what you saw in him. What you already knew was in him. It's like he's transformed into a different person since he walked in."

Peter snorted again.

“You sure about that?” she joked.

“Maybe after he’s had a good sleep.”

“Does that mean you’ll work with him?”

“Seeing as I’ve put my trust in God, I guess I better trust His judgment. Once Peter wakes up, we’ll have a candid conversation about it. If he needs to stay with his wife, then we need to allow for that.”

“I have the feeling God will tell him to go.”

“But how do we know what God’s saying? You said it wasn’t always clear.”

“Hmm...it’s easier to experience than explain. The longer you walk with Him, the better you’ll learn His voice.”

“Oh, great. We’re at this very importantly decisive moment, and I’m a newbie.”

“Lucky for you, there’s plenty of grace to be had. Don’t worry—if you’re listening, God will make it clear...if you’re listening. A lot of the time, it feels like peace. You just know.”

“I guess with three of us listening, those are pretty good odds that we’ll get it right. I can work with that. Once we’re all rested, we’ll talk logistics and see how we feel about it. Which means you and I should get some sleep too. You can take the bed in the other room. I’ll sleep in the chair.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.”

They both stood, and Hannah moved to the hall but stopped and turned, hurrying back to give Robby another hug.

“Thank you for being you. And thank you for opening your heart to the truth.”

“Sleep well, Hannah.”

“You too.”

He took her hand to give her fingers a squeeze as she walked away and didn’t let go until she moved out of reach.

He knew it wasn’t just him that felt something, and now with the God part of the issue across the line, maybe there was something there he shouldn’t avoid. But this wasn’t the time to explore their feelings for each other. There was too much to untangle right now with other, more pressing matters at hand.

He dropped into the chair, wondering if he’d sleep, but then the fatigue hit him, and that was his last thought.



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A jolt went through Robby's leg, and he jumped awake, ready to fight. Peter stood before him, holding out a coffee.

"Time to get up."

Peter's demeanor had changed so dramatically, Robby almost didn't recognize him. "You're looking fresh."

"I am."

"How's Jemi?" Robby felt an expectant longing and expectation of her healing.

"If there was any change, I would have gotten a call. But the good news is, even though she may be the same, I am not. I've been praying that she can hold on long enough so I can say goodbye if the time comes."

"I can pray for that too."

"Thanks."

Hannah wandered into the living room, stretching. "Morning, boys," she said with a yawn.

Peter handed her a coffee. "I've been out early. Went for a run and thought you guys could use something to wake you up besides that black sludge in the kitchen that has the audacity to call itself coffee."

"This is heaven," Hannah said after taking a sip. "Thank you."

"Are we ready to talk strategy? Or do you need more time to wake up?"

"I'm ready if you are," Robby said. "We have a lot to discuss."

"Hannah said it was connected to Burma."

"Yeah. TreadCraft Dynamics, the company she works for, is somehow mixed up in this, and I want to find all the players. We're pretty sure we have a good starting point."

"Is that how you two met? Over this Burma issue? Or did you know each other before?"

"He thought I was the bad guy," Hannah said, lifting an eyebrow at Robby when he looked at her, offended. "What? You did. He knocked me out and stuffed me in his trunk."

"Hey, I already apologized for that. It was a bad call, and I'm sorry. I got carried away. At least I was on the job, otherwise you'd be none the wiser."

"Sounds like you two have some unfinished business." Peter laughed. "Putting your differences aside, tell me what you've found."

"We know of at least two people who are definitely connected to it."

Robby's phone dinged, and he looked at it, frowning.

"Bad news?" Hannah said.

"It's about that employee that left TreadCraft. Dominic Baker."

"You found him?"

"According to the date, he died right after he supposedly relocated to D.C. Car accident."

"They killed him?"

"It was reported as an accident."

"Do you think that's true?"

"Not with everything else that's happening, no. It makes sense that, if he'd handled that trip wrong, they decided to take him out of the picture. Same reason they tried to kill us."

"I still don't understand."

"Which part?"

"Like the fact that they were watching the house, then tried to kill me. I wasn't a threat, and then, all of the sudden, I was. What changed?"

"That's probably my fault. I should have been more careful at your house. I know the car wasn't there when I arrived, but that doesn't mean they weren't nearby watching, and if they already suspected you knew more than you should, once news got back to Pike, he put the pieces together. He was trying to get to you peacefully, but they ran out of time when I came into the picture."

"So, tell me what our first move is," Peter said.

"We found evidence of where their base of operations might be. I believe we'll find better intel over there than we will anywhere here." Robby had brought the picture of the building they'd found on Hannah's computer. He showed it to Peter. "That's where we're headed."

"I know that town."

"It's not far from where our family was," Hannah said.

"I still have some friends over there. What about equipment and transport?"

"I've got all that covered," Robby said. "The only thing we need is a passport. Did you bring yours, by any chance?"

"No. I wasn't thinking straight when I left and hadn't considered all the possibilities. It will be a couple of hours' drive to go get it."

"That's fine. The plane isn't ready yet anyway. I'll come with you, and I can have them redirect closer to your house."

“And what about me?” Hannah said.

“Aren’t you coming?” Peter said.

Robby stood and pulled his jacket on. “Why would she come? She’s here so she can hide.”

Peter’s eyebrow lifted. “She doesn’t need to do any of the heavy lifting, but if we’re going to Burma, Hannah would be a great asset to have on the trip. She knows the people and the area.”

“A lot has changed since she was a kid.”

“I’ve gone back a lot over the years,” she said. “I know the people and the area.”

“And I’d appreciate her input,” Peter said.

Robby looked at Hannah, who was suppressing a grin. “Did you two plan this ahead of time?”

“No,” she said. “I swear. He just knows me better than you.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“She’ll be fine as long as we don’t have a repeat of Libya.” He got a funny grin on his face.

“What?” Robby said.

“Never mind. I shouldn’t have said anything. I was just reminiscing.”

“About a mission that went wrong?”

“It worked out great in the end.”

“What worked out great?” Hannah said.

“I was helping a couple of friends of mine on a job. Oliver and Morgan. Actually, if I remember correctly, he didn’t want her going either.”

“Sounds like a smart man.”

“It had nothing to do with smart. It was because he was falling in love with her and didn’t want to admit it.”

“Uh,” Robby stumbled. “So what went wrong?”

“Things got dicey. Ollie and Morgan were kidnapped, but they made it out. Bit of a miracle, actually. And we got the guy in the end.”

“Now Hannah’s definitely not going.”

“There are plenty of safe places in Burma. I’ve got friends who can keep an eye on her. She’ll be nothing but a great help.”

“Come on, Robby,” Hannah said. “Peter looks out for me. He wouldn’t knowingly put my life in danger. I promise I’ll stay out of trouble. I would love to visit. It’s been so long.”

Robby squeezed his forehead. “Fine. I’ll let you come under one

condition.”

“Name it.”

“You have no part in our raid on TreadCraft’s base. You will not pretend to stay away and then follow us in. You got it?”

“Absolutely. I don’t have any interest in coming along on that part of the field trip.”

“Okay, since I can see I’m outnumbered, even though this is my operation, you can come.”

“Great. It’s settled. Should we go now?”

Robby grumbled as he stomped toward the door. “If everyone is ready.”

“He doesn’t like not getting his own way,” she whispered to Peter.

“I heard that.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t like not getting your own way either, but you somehow manage to get one up on me more often than I’m comfortable with.”

“I can’t help it if I’m right most of the time.”

Robby shook his head but couldn’t hide his smile. “Let’s go.”

“Do you mind if I drive with Peter? It’s been a long time. I’d like to catch up.”

“You just don’t want to look at my grumpy face over the next several hours.”

“That too.” She bumped his shoulder in play as she walked past him, following Peter out the door.

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When they were driving down Peter’s long driveway, he slowed more than was necessary.

“You should be prepared,” he said. “Jemi’s at the end.”

“I know. Who’s been staying with her while you’ve been away?”

“Mostly the nurse. She’s become a very good friend of ours over the years. She’s been so supportive. Especially in the last few months.”

“Peter.” She put her hand on his arm. “Are you sure you want to leave her? We’ll understand if you don’t.”

“I want to stay with her more than anything.”

“Then you should.”

“Don’t do that to me. Don’t tempt me. I’m not strong enough. God’s made it clear. There’s nothing more I can do for her anyway. All I’ve been doing for the past several weeks is sitting by her bed mourning. That’s the last thing she would want. Me hanging around waiting for her to die. And one day—” His voice cracked. “One day we’ll be together again. Forever.”

He parked in front of the house.

“Teach us to realize the brevity of life so that we may grow in wisdom,” he said.

“Is that a scripture?”

“Psalm ninety, verse twelve.”

“Do you want me to give you a minute?”

“No. It won’t make this any easier.”

He got out of the car and nodded to Robby, who’d parked beside him. Then, they climbed up to the front door. Hannah could see the weight Peter carried. He’d had a breakthrough, but that didn’t mean the grief wasn’t still real.

With his hand on the door handle, he turned to her. “I’m glad you get to see her one last time.”

“Me too.”

But before Peter could open the door, it opened for him.

“Wha—,” he said, tripping back into Hannah. “I can’t —”

“What is it?” Robby whispered into Hannah’s ear.

“It’s Jemi...she’s—” Her words cut off as tears poured down her cheeks.

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## Chapter 20

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PETER'S FACE WAS WHITE, and he began to shake. Robby stepped up beside him and supported him in case his legs gave way.

"Sorry," Jemi said. "I thought this would be a good surprise."

"I don't understand," Peter whispered. He struggled for breath.

Another woman appeared at the door, a heavysset woman in her forties with a broad smile of white teeth.

"Can you believe it!" she said, bouncing on her toes. "It's happened. It's really happened. She made me wait in the kitchen, but I couldn't take it anymore."

"What's going on?" Hannah said, afraid to believe the impossible. Jemi looked nearly the same as the last time she'd seen her. A little older maybe and tired, but not the way Peter had described her.

Jemi's eyes moved to hers. "It's been too long, Hannah. You're so grown up."

"I thought—" She looked at Peter, then back again. "Are you...are you sick, or..."

“No. Not anymore.” Jemi reached out to Peter and took his hand, pulling him a little closer. She was being careful with him.

He reached up and touched her face. “This is real? I don’t understand.”

“It’s amazing how you can pray for something for so long, but when it finally happens, it’s too much to grasp.”

“I’m afraid to believe it’s true.”

She wrapped her arms around him, and he collapsed into her, sobbing.

Robby put a hand on Hannah’s arm. “God really healed her?”

“I guess so. But he’s right. It’s a little terrifying to accept in case it gets taken away.”

“Why would it get taken away?”

“We are trained to believe that, when something’s too good to be true, it probably is.”

“Except right now.”

“Yeah. Except right now. This is incredible.”

Peter pulled away from Jemi but kept his arm around her. He wiped his sleeve across his face. “I can’t stop looking at you. You look amazing. I want to know everything that happened. When it happened. How it happened.”

“Why don’t we go inside? It’s a little chilly out here.”

“I’m Carla, by the way,” the other woman said as she led the way to the living room.

“Sorry,” Peter said. “I should have introduced you.”

“You have other things on your mind. You guys settle in, and I’ll get some drinks and snacks.”

“Thank you.” Peter reached out and took her hand. “Thank you for everything.”

“No. Thank you. I got to be the first one to find out. That is a real gift.”

Jemi and Peter sat close on the couch. “When did it happen?” Peter asked.

“Last night. I woke up, and my mind was clear of its fog. I looked around the room and wondered what was happening. At first, I didn’t know where I was. I didn’t recognize the room, and I couldn’t figure out why I was in bed. I found it hard to move, so I laid there for a while thinking.”

“That must have been frightening,” Hannah said.

“You’d think so, but no. I was just confused. Then, slowly, everything came back together. I could remember being sick, and then I remembered not being able to get upstairs, so we built this room. Jay was here. You remember, Peter?”

“I do.”

“Isla had gone to help Sara and Tom. I could remember that. But then everything got muddled.”

“That’s when you got really sick.”

“But I remember you sitting by my bed and praying for me over and over again. I wanted to tell you to let it go, but I knew you wouldn’t.”

“No. I couldn’t let you go. I couldn’t give you up.”

“I don’t know how long it was that I laid there thinking. It was still dark when I felt I had the strength to sit up, and then I moved my legs over the edge of the bed. I knew something was happening. I knew I shouldn’t be able to do that. I didn’t move after that for the longest time, wondering whether I was dead, or if my sickness had been a dream, or if I was hallucinating.”

“That’s when I turned up,” Carla said, entering the room with a tray that she laid down on the coffee table. “It was four o’clock in the morning. I’m always up early, and I like to check on her. As soon as I saw her, I screamed.” She laughed. “It was dark, and all I could see was a strange person sitting on the bed. She gave me the biggest fright. Then, when she stood and came over to tell me it was okay, I almost hit her. I couldn’t make sense of it.”

“You can see I don’t look the same as when you left,” Jemi said to Peter.

“Yeah. That’s why I was so confused when you opened the door. It didn’t make sense.”

“God didn’t only get rid of the cancer. He’s been restoring my body.”

“She looks better now than even when I first found her,” Carla said. “Once I got myself back together, she asked me for some breakfast, and boy, you should have seen her. I told her to slow down. I thought she’d be sick.” She giggled. “Then I realized she’d spent the last couple years being sick. Eating too much was the least of her problems.”

“So.” Peter let out a long breath. “You’re healed. For real.”

“It appears that I am.”

“And the doctor has been here? He said you were cancer free?”

“Do you need him to confirm it to believe it?”

“No. But I want the world to know.”

“There hasn’t been much time for a doctor’s visits, and I wanted you to be the first to see me besides Carla.”

He pulled her into his arms and held her.

Carla pulled the coffee table closer to where Hannah and Robby were



sitting. “They’ll probably be a while if you two want to dig in.”

Hannah took a cookie from the plate. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“I’ve been pinching myself over and over again. When Peter sent me the text to say he’d be returning this afternoon, I almost told him the news, but Jemi wanted to surprise him. I knew he’d be shocked. I knew it would be hard to take in, but boy, was it worth it. Watching them together like this is amazing.”

“Yeah. It’s pretty special. Maybe we should take these treats into the other room and give them some space.”

“I’m with you,” Robby said. “I feel like we’re intruding. Besides, I’ve got a few more phone calls to make.”

As they filtered out of the room, Hannah took one last look at the couple, who were now talking quietly to one another, unaware of anything else that was going on in the world. It was a moment she knew would be a treasure to them the rest of their lives, and it was a happy ending she was grateful to be a part of. Things didn’t always work out this way, but she knew it was a taste of things to come when Jesus returned and there were no more tears and they would know a level of joy beyond their understanding.

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Robby hung up his phone and took a deep breath of the fresh air as he stood out on the porch. There had been a delay with the plane, so they couldn’t leave until morning, which was good for all of them. As much as they were eager to get to Burma, this was a day to savor.

But although he was happy for Peter and Jemi, it had created a new longing in him that he struggled with every time he looked at Hannah. Maybe he was afraid that the kind of connection Peter and Jemi had wasn’t available to him. But more and more, he wanted that with Hannah. She was the first person who ever got him to consider the idea that getting married and having a family were good things. Things he actually wanted.

The door opened behind him, and he turned.

“Dinner’s ready,” Hannah said, crossing her arms against the cold. “It’s beautiful out here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“What a day.”

“I don’t know that I’ll ever experience anything like it again in this lifetime.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But you know what’s great? I know that anytime I’m afraid and unsure of God’s plans, I can think back to this moment and know, no matter what, God knows what He’s doing, and He’ll move mountains to get His plans across the line.”

“Hannah.”

“Yeah?”

But he didn’t have the words. He didn’t even know what he wanted to say. It was the feeling of wanting to be closer to her more than anything, but he didn’t know how to make that happen. “Nothing. Never mind. We should get in there before they start without us.”

Inside, Jemi was laughing. Her color had continued to improve and now appeared completely restored. Robby didn’t know what she had looked like before, but she had no sign of sickness anymore.

“Everything all set with the plane?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, we’ll be ready to leave in the morning.”

“Great.”

“We’ll understand if you want to stay here now, though.”

“No. I told you I’m coming, so I’m coming. Jemi and I will have plenty of time once I’m back.” He took hold of her hand.

“Once you’re back?” Jemi said.

“You don’t think I should go?”

“No, you definitely should go. But I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Peter said without hesitation. “You’re staying here so you can fully recover. You need to see the doctor and let the hospital give you the all clear.”

She yanked her hand out of his. “Excuse me, Peter Black, but there is no way I will let you bench me on this mission. I think I let you get your own way too much while I was sick.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Am I? What purpose will it serve for me to stay home? I can see the doctor later. Nothing’s going to change between now and then. I’ve been out of action for too many years because of that wretched cancer. I need to get out of here. This place is too full of sick. This is the perfect opportunity.”

“Jemi.”

“Don’t you give me that voice. You know it’s pointless. This is

happening whether you like it or not. I'm coming."

Robby snorted.

"What's so funny?" Peter said. "This is not the same."

"The same as what?" Jemi said.

"It's a similar conversation to the one Peter and I had about Hannah coming along."

"You didn't want Hannah to go? No surprises there. I can see the way you look at her."

"Jemi." Peter widened his eyes in warning.

"Sorry, I have no filter at the moment. But you'd be stupid not to bring her, she'll be brilliant. And so will I."

"You were on your deathbed hours ago."

"And now I'm not."

"I'd feel better if you took more time to recover. There will be other missions."

"What part of 'I am healed' haven't you figured out yet?"

"You have to admit, she's looking good," Hannah said.

Peter gave her a look. "Shouldn't you be on my side? I got Robby to agree to you coming."

"That's because I should be going, and so should Jemi. There are only two of you experienced in this kind of thing. Why not make it a third?"

"Wait a sec," Robby said. "Jemi, you're ex-special forces?"

"In a manner of speaking. It's been a while. I'm not stupid. I know I'm not capable of going into the field just yet, but I can definitely give you support. And it means we can be together. Just imagine snuggling up to me on the plane ride over."

Peter scrunched up his face, and Jemi laughed.

"That's it. I got him."

"That's only because you know all my weaknesses. It wasn't a fair fight."

"I can live with that."

"And I'm going to hold you to your promise not to go out into the field. You and Hannah can keep an eye on each other, and neither one of you will be going anywhere near anything resembling danger."

She looked at Hannah, and the side of her mouth curled in a smile. "Deal." When she held her hand out for Peter to shake, he squinted at her, then stabbed at a bean on his plate with his fork, shoving it awkwardly in his mouth.

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## Chapter 21

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HANNAH CLOSED her eyes and lifted her face to the hot sun when she stepped outside of the airport.

“You’ve missed this?” Robby asked, walking up beside her.

“Yes and no. It still feels like coming home. Or maybe it’s just nostalgia.”

“Do you think you’ll ever come back to live?”

“Don’t know. But probably not.” She took a deep breath. “Thanks for bringing me. I didn’t realize how much it would mean, being here again.”

“I’m not sure I had an option, but now that you’re here, I’m glad you came.”

“You guys ready?” Peter slapped Robby on the back. The years had faded off him on the way over, and Jemi continued to improve. “The van taking us to the hotel is over there.”

“Thanks for organizing this part of the trip,” Robby said. “It helps to have local connections. I know some people in the area, but not this close.”

“I’m glad I could lend a hand, but wait until you see the hotel. You will be very impressed.”

“Didn’t know they had five-star accommodation here.” Robby chuckled. “Last time I was here, I spent a lot of time sleeping outdoors.”

Peter rubbed his hands together. “You’re gonna love it. I had to pull a few strings, but I’m very pleased with the result.”

“Can we visit the school first?” Hannah said.

“What school?”

“I know everyone’s tired, but after hearing about what Robby found. I need to see it. I want to know what TreadCraft has been doing.”

“Hannah,” Robby said. “Are you sure? I think it will upset you.”

“I know. It will. But I need to see for myself.”

“I’m up for it if the rest of you are,” Jemi said.

Peter shook his head. “You astound me. Only *you* would be ready for more after rising from the dead.”

“You remember Peter’s mother-in-law?”

“Wouldn’t that be your mother?”

“Peter from the Bible. After Jesus healed her, she got up and started serving them.”

“That’s true. Well, if everyone else is interested, I’ll go along.”

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When they pulled up to the school after a long, bumpy ride, Robby jumped from the van before it had stopped.

He didn’t make it to the steps of the school before he pressed the back of his hand against his mouth and nose. The dead body must have been there for over a week. It lay sprawled across the threshold.

“Do you know who it is?” Peter asked, approaching slowly.

“It’s hard to tell, but I can guess.” He turned and looked back at Hannah, who was clinging to Jemi, her eyes wide as she stared at the corpse. “Stay there. I’ll check inside.”

He stepped over the body and entered the school, following bloody drag marks that led to a pool of blood toward the back of the main room. The walls were covered in more graffiti, and torn books were strewn everywhere.

“This was retribution for what my team and I uncovered. They would have wanted to make sure the surrounding towns and villages didn’t get too excited about their small victory. We should have been here to protect them.”

“Did you expect this kind of response?”

“No. We expected them to pull back. And they did at the start, but it looks like as soon as we were out of the way, they made sure to instill fear back into the people.”

“That’s always a risk on these missions. Especially if you don’t have the manpower to remain behind. Who do you think the dead man is?”

“From what I could see of him, he looks like a teacher from a nearby village. He was one of the people we liaised with to get information. He has a wife and a kid. I wish I had been here to stop them.”

“Well, you’re here now. We should get back to the hotel.”

“Yeah.”

Robby’s cheek twitched as he fought to control his anger when he returned to the van.

“Do you know who he was?” Hannah said after they left, and Robby didn’t say a word. He formed the answer in his mind, but found he didn’t want to talk about it.

“A teacher from the village,” Peter offered. He rested a hand on Hannah’s arm and shook his head to warn her against more questions. It was good to have Peter on the team. He understood what the others couldn’t. Once Robby processed the death, he’d put it out of his mind. Dwelling on something like that was dangerous. It could make you sloppy and distracted, and he wouldn’t risk messing up this mission. Especially now that he saw the rebels were resisting with the help of TreadCraft employees.

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The street was busy when they pulled up beside a row of buildings, their roofs coated in rust.

“This isn’t a hotel,” Robby said. “You said I’d be impressed. I’m pretty sure this is a downgrade from our last stay.”

“You know what they say.”

“No, what do they say?”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover. It belongs to a friend of mine. Trust me. You’ll be impressed.”

They entered a high-ceilinged room full of wooden wardrobes and smaller cabinets. Along one side of the building, sawdust was pushed up in

small piles near the woodworking machines.

“You’re late,” a woman in a pink tracksuit said when she appeared from a low loft along another wall. Her dark hair was pulled into a ponytail that bounced as she descended the stairs.

“Su Su. It’s been a long time. Sorry for the delay. We made a stop.” Peter embraced his friend, but she pushed him aside when she spotted Jemi. “Please tell me you are not a ghost.” She embraced her friend, then held her at arm’s length.

“I was close. God healed me.”

Su Su lit up. “I have been praying and praying for you. Peter didn’t tell me you were coming. This is an amazing surprise.” They hugged again.

“I’m very pleased I could come too. It’s been a lifetime.”

“These are some friends of mine,” Peter said. “Hannah and Robby. Hannah grew up nearby. Her parents were missionaries years ago.”

“I hope they are well?” Su Su asked.

“My dad was killed while we were still here, and my mom died last year.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay.”

“You are all probably very tired from your trip. If you would all like to get settled, I’ve prepared the room upstairs the way you requested, Peter.”

“Thank you. We could use a short rest. But we have a lot of work to do and not much time to get it done.”

“I understand. Follow me.” She turned and headed back up the stairs.

A door at the back of the loft led them up another flight of stairs and into a separate part of the building on the top floor. It was full of computer equipment.

Robby dropped his bag on the floor. “Whoa.”

“I told you you’d like it. We have internet and high security. You’ll have access to whatever information you require.” Peter bounced on one of the cots against the wall. “The accommodation might not be five-star, but the equipment is.”

“This is an amazing setup,” Robby said, checking one of the computers. “How’d you get your hands on this hardware, Su Su?”

“The people I accommodate are very generous.” She winked at Peter. “Also, I took the liberty of preparing the surveillance for you.” She turned on the computer Robby was looking at and brought up several screens that

connected to the adjacent displays.

“That’s the building from the photo,” Robby said.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on it and made a few notes.” She pushed a notebook in front of him. “I’m sorry I haven’t been watching full time, but everything is recorded.”

“Above and beyond, as usual,” Peter said. “How’s the furniture business going?”

Su Su shrugged. “The charcoal trade makes it difficult. Too much export. Not enough timber.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You and your father always produced lovely pieces.”

“Lucky for me, I have other sources of income that allow me to continue doing the work I love. If you’d all like to get settled in, I have a few things I need to do.”

“Of course. We can look after ourselves.”

“Oh.” She stopped when she reached the door. “I almost forgot.”

After pulling four wooden keychains carved with intricate details from her pocket, she handed one to each of them. “A small gift.”

“It’s beautiful,” Hannah said, turning the piece over in her hand. “You really are talented.”

“It’s nothing. Just a small token of appreciation for what you are doing and the danger you’re putting yourselves in. I lost a friend this year to that group. People are afraid.”

Hannah set her keychain on the table, and Su Su hurried over, picking it up and putting it back in her hand. “You must keep them on you at all times. Otherwise, I will get deeply offended.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” She looked across the room at Peter, who was grinning.

“We wouldn’t want to offend our host. That’s very kind.” He tucked his in his pocket, and the rest did the same.

She nodded and left.

Robby waited until she closed the door before saying, “Where’d you find that gem?”

“Decades ago, Jemi and I were on an assignment. We found her father being tortured for information. Su Su was only a baby at the time, but we’ve stayed close ever since. Every time we got together, Su Su’s father would tell the story about that day when we found him. He always made the point that



God had sent us to save him just before he broke, but I don't think you could break that man."

"When did he pass?"

"A couple of years ago."

"Su Su seems like a remarkable woman."

"She is. That's why I keep sending plenty of work her way."

"Which one? Wood or electronics?"

"Both. We have one of her pieces in our house. It cost a fortune to import it, but it was worth it."

"When we get back, you'll have to show me."

"That's easy enough. Now, we've got a few hours until it's dark, so we should all get some rest while we can."

"That's a good idea," Robby said. "But tonight I want to go get a look inside the building if we can. I'm hoping the security will be simple enough to get through so we can get in and out without anyone knowing. Once we have an idea of what we've got, we can make a plan."

"Sounds good to me," Peter said. "Jemi, you and Hannah can stay on surveillance."

"I know I said I wasn't ready for the field, but I'm changing my mind."

"Don't you start. It's too late to change things now. You are staying put, and that's final."

She sighed. "Hannah, have you ever seen that look on Peter's face?"

"I haven't, but I have the feeling it's the look that says there's no point arguing."

"Correct. One of the keys to a good marriage is to pick your battles. Fine, my love. We will wait here for you while you get to do all the fun stuff."

Hannah laughed. "You don't have to worry about me putting up a fight. I don't know how to do all the military-type stuff, but I can sit in front of a computer and watch."

"Girl time it is. You boys have fun, but not too much."

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## Chapter 22

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THE TEAM SLEPT for the rest of the daylight hours, and then Peter and Robby collected the gear they needed and headed for the door. When Peter kissed Jemi goodbye, Robby and Hannah accidentally made eye contact. He gave her a tight smile, then left.

“Hannah’s stronger than you give her credit for,” Peter said when they got in the van.

“She’s a civilian. Her skillset isn’t suitable for potential conflict. Even she knows that.”

“Listen to you. Civilian? Skillset? I agree on all of the above, but you know that’s not what I meant. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not one to talk. I’ve asked Jemi to stay behind, and she’d probably be better at this than me.”

“Really?” Robby wasn’t convinced. “She looks great for her age, and you can’t even tell she’s been sick, which I’m still trying to get my head around, but you are both on the old side for working in the field. No offense.”

“You haven’t seen her in action. She’s like an alley cat on a mission like this. Yes, she’s not as young as she used to be, but I didn’t ask her to stay

back because I thought she couldn't do the job. Even out of practice, she'd be great. To you, anyway."

"Why not to you?"

"Same reason you don't want Hannah tagging along. Or one of them, at least."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"In the beginning, when Jemi and I were getting to know each other, we worked together. Went on missions. We made a great team. My strengths were her weaknesses and vice versa."

"You guys met on the job? I was wondering."

Peter laughed. "You could say that. I'll tell you the story when this is all over. Or maybe I'll let her tell it. Despite our differences, we saved ourselves and several other women that day. Then she began working with my team, and we got sent out together a lot."

"So what happened?"

"I fought it for a while, but eventually, I couldn't deny that I had fallen in love with her. Fear got in the way of the job. I started making decisions based on protecting her instead of what was right for the mission."

"You think I'm keeping Hannah back at base because I'm in love with her?"

"No. I know why she stayed back. But don't limit her because of your own fear."

"I'm not afraid. And I'm not in love with her."

"But you're falling?"

"A topic for another time. We're coming up on the building now."

Peter chuckled. "Good. That will give you time to process your thoughts and come up with a suitable response."

"There's nothing to process."

"I'm just saying."

"Well stop. We've got work to do."

---

Hannah watched the displays, focusing on any movement that appeared and checking each angle they had.

"Sitting that close to the screens will give you a headache," Jemi said.

She was lying on her cot, reading a book.

Hannah scooted back but kept looking. They had multiple views of the front of the building, but that was all. It would have been too dangerous for Su Su to set up surveillance from the back. Her fingers fidgeted with the mouse cord, and her leg jiggled, bouncing the screen.

Jemi tossed her book aside and sat beside her, resting a hand on her knee.

“Don’t say it,” Hannah said.

“Say what?”

“That everything will be okay.”

“I would never say that. I know all too well that it’s not true. What I was going to say is, you won’t see them on the screen if they do their jobs properly.”

Hannah grimaced, then said, “I would rather keep an eye on anyone else coming and going. That’s what we need to keep an eye on, right?” She looked up at Jemi and balked. “What? What’s with the smile?”

“You were hoping to see him.”

“Not if he shouldn’t be seen.”

“Have you known Robby long?”

“Not very. Why?”

“It’s hard in these extreme situations not to grow attached. He can protect you. That creates a strong pull.”

“I’m not growing attached. I care about these kids who are being harmed, and Robby is doing his best to save them. I appreciate what he’s doing. That’s all.”

“Can I give you some advice?”

“I’m tempted to say no.”

“Don’t try to pretend. It will only wear you out.”

“I’m not pretending anything.”

“You’re attracted to Robby and —”

“No. I’m not.”

“Are you embarrassed?”

“No. But I know there are much more important things at stake right now. My relationship status is the last thing on my mind.”

“Except it’s not. You want it to be that way, but denying it only makes it more insistent. You’re better off admitting it so God can show you the right way forward with him.”

“There is no way forward with him. There’s nothing going on. We’ve got

work to do. Besides, we have very different lives.”

“Do you? Looks to me like they’re aligned.”

“Right now. But what about after this is all over?”

“What if I told you he liked you too?”

Hannah’s face heated. “Did he tell you that?”

“No, but I can tell. And the only reason I told you was so you couldn’t hide from your own feelings. You don’t need to avoid it. You need to face it and ask God for wisdom. Trust me. I fought my feelings for Peter for a long time. I would have preferred to dislike him. I tried very hard and almost succeeded. Thankfully, I didn’t. Turned out to be a waste of time and nearly caused some very big problems. It could have cost people their lives.”

“We’ve had a couple of moments where it seemed clear we were attracted to one another, but we both pulled back, and I don’t know what that means. I hate it because it makes me feel so stupid around him. I’m worried what he’s going to think about everything I do, so I overreact in the other direction and get stubborn instead. It ends up driving us both crazy.”

“The good news is, when you first start falling for someone, they can do no wrong, so don’t worry about being a fool. Robby has stars in his eyes. He thinks you’re amazing. Trust me.”

“Then why didn’t he want me to come to Burma?”

“You know why.”

“I don’t want to assume anything. This is all very uncomfortable.”

Jemi laughed. “You and I are so alike. Peter always told me you reminded him of me.”

“Really? I don’t see it. If I were you, I don’t think I could have let Peter go on this mission. Not after everything that’s just happened. You got each other back. Why would you want to be apart again? I don’t think I could do that.”

“It’s never easy. I let him go because it was the right thing to do. Not only to help others, but we need a distraction to help us step back into life together too. We’ve been praying for healing for a long time, but God chose to wait until now to do it. I think this is all part of his timing. Letting him go now, I have to do what Peter had to do for me and trust God with his life. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve done it, either.”

“How do you deal with it?”

“Is that the reason you’re worried about getting close to Robby?”

“It crossed my mind. Right now, I have no say in the matter because we

aren't together, but I am worried about him. I don't want anything to happen to him. How do you do it?"

"I made a decision a long time ago not to wallow in fear of something that is outside of my control. We pray before he goes, and I know that he's always listening for the leading of the Holy Spirit. If God says don't go, he won't. After he walks out the door, that's it. He's in God's hands."

"But Peter doesn't feel the same?"

Jemi thought for a moment before responding. "Peter has always had a harder time with this stuff. I stayed here because I know he'll work better without me there to worry about. I make him vulnerable, and that's the last thing I want to do. You probably do the same to Robby, and that's why he was reluctant to have you on this trip."

"I kind of knew that, but I can't get rid of that thing in the back of my mind that says he doesn't think I'm good enough."

"That's definitely not —"

They heard a muffled scream, and both jumped up, looking at the door.

"Quickly. This way," Jemi said, pulling Hannah to the other side of the room, where they went to a window. She pushed it, then jammed the heel of her hand on the frame when it stuck. The corner cracked, but it opened after some resistance.

"What's going on?" Hannah said as Jemi directed her out. "I thought we were safe here."

"Stay quiet," Jemi said while keeping her eyes on the door. "Climb out."

Hannah leaned out the window, her heart hammering. She wasn't a fan of heights. "Are you sure this is necessary? Maybe Su Su dropped something on her toe." They heard a bang and a louder scream. Hannah clung to the window. "Shouldn't we do something to help her?"

"I will. But not you. I need to get you safe first."

"Let me help you."

"You can help by climbing out the window. One of us needs to tell Peter and Robby what happened. Just in case I don't make it out."

"I won't let you go. I can't let you die."

Jemi fisted Hannah's shirt in her hands and yanked her close. "This is not up for discussion," she hissed. "Get out the window now, or else we're both dead." She shoved Hannah toward the window. "Go."

The carefree, confident Jemi that Hannah knew was gone. This was the soldier. It was a side she'd never seen before, and it made her obey, carefully

climbing out onto a rusty pipe. It gave way as she put her weight onto it, and she grabbed the windowsill to keep from plummeting to the ground.

Jemi leaned out over her. “There’s another foothold to the right. Quickly.”

Hannah’s foot probed the wall beside her and found it, testing her weight. This one held.

“Go. Now.” Jemi squeezed her arm. “Find help, but don’t put yourself in danger.”

“I’ll hide out here and wait for you.”

“No—” A loud bang rattled the walls, and Jemi disappeared from the window.

A moment of indecision kept Hannah frozen in place, but when she heard the gunshot, she shimmied to the ground, her heart broken. God wouldn’t let Jemi die after healing her. That didn’t make any sense.

Another loud bang was followed by shouting as Hannah moved into the shadows, watching the window for any sign of what was happening. A man appeared above, and she sank back farther out of sight until he disappeared again.

Jemi had said to get help, but she wasn’t sure where to look for it. She tapped her pocket, looking for a phone she knew wasn’t there, but she felt the small bulge of the keychain. Pulling it out, she ran her thumb along the carving. Su Su could already be dead. And for what?

Stuffing the trinket back into her pocket, she clenched her hands into fists, wanting to scream at the unfairness of it all. Why was she the one who was spared? She shouldn’t have left when Jemi commanded her to. She was a coward. If she had stayed, maybe she could have caused a distraction long enough to give Jemi an opportunity to defend herself.

*What do I do? How can I fix this? What am I supposed to do?*

When Peter and Robby returned, she’d have nothing to tell them but how she hid. That wasn’t good enough.

She could hear voices from inside, so she climbed over a fence and snuck around to the front of the building, checking the street. Two cars were parked at the front of the shop. They were nice ones that didn’t belong in this part of town.

“Seven-B-one-nine-five-three.” She repeated the license plate she could see, memorizing it. They could trace the cars. There would be a way to find them and make them pay. She would make sure Jemi and Su Su’s deaths

weren't for nothing.

The door to one of the cars opened, and she ducked low, pulling back to make sure she was out of view, but she wanted to get a look at as many of them as she could. The man who got out was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He had short, dark hair, but he never turned to face her before going inside. She'd wait until they came out, and she'd sear the images of their faces in her mind.

If only Peter and Robby came back now, they'd know what to do. They'd know how to handle these murderers. But the pain of imagining Peter finding out his wife was dead was excruciating. Just the thought of her and Su Su's lifeless eyes was enough to sicken her. Her arms and legs felt like lead.

"What do I do, God? What more can I do?"

She heard a click from behind and spun around, nearly falling out onto the street. But it didn't matter. The man, holding a gun, swung at her head. It connected, and she dropped.



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## Chapter 23

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"I'VE GOT THIS," Peter said as he crouched in front of the back door. They'd found some security on the building, but it was manageable. "I might be rusty on a few things, but picking locks has always been easy for me."

Robby made a show of checking his watch. "You sure? This is taking an awfully long time."

Peter smirked. Then, the lock clicked. "Piece of cake."

With their weapons drawn, they entered.

Best-case scenario was that they got the intel they needed without anyone knowing they were there. But they would do whatever it took to take these guys down.

Peter positioned himself at the door of the first room and nodded for Robby to enter. As soon as the room was cleared, they lowered their weapons. It was a large room with several desks and filing cabinets. Drawers were open, but everything was empty.

Robby moved his flashlight along the floor, then ran a finger across the desk, checking for dust. "I don't think it's been long since they left," he

whispered.

Peter nodded and headed out of the room to check the next.

After finding that room empty except for a couple scraps of paper, Robby scratched his head. “This isn’t looking good.” He picked up one of the papers and looked it over.

“Anything useful?” Peter said.

“Nope.”

“I’m gonna call Jemi and ask her to look through the previous footage.”

“Do you think they knew we were coming?”

“That’s impossible.”

“You’re sure you can trust Su Su?”

“With my life. If someone tipped them off, it wasn’t her.”

“Maybe it’s a precaution. When their attempt on Hannah’s life was unsuccessful, maybe they thought they’d better play it safe, and now we’re too late.”

“Makes sense. If we’re lucky, there will be a clue on the tapes. If there is anything to be found, Jemi’ll spot it.”

“They couldn’t have gotten everything out the back. There isn’t enough room in that alley.”

“They could if they were only lugging paperwork and if they took their time. Looks like most of the furniture was left behind.” He shook his head and dialed, waiting while it rang, then rolled his eyes. “Voicemail. Hey, Jemi, it’s me. You guys sleeping on the job? Call me back. We’ve found nothing. I need you to look at the past surveillance footage and see if you can spot anything. Talk soon.”

“I didn’t think they’d sleep until we got back.”

“We’re all pretty wiped out. I’m glad, actually. It’s nice knowing Jemi’s not pushing herself too hard.”

“What do we do now?”

“Let’s finish clearing the place out, just in case. Maybe we’ll catch a break. Then we’ll head back. We can take turns staring at a computer screen until something pops. Unless it doesn’t.”

“We’ll figure something out. I won’t leave Burma until we do.”

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Robby stretched after he got out of the van. "This has been a long day."

"I can take the first shift. I'll go through a few hours while you get some sleep. Then, when my eyes start bugging out, you can jump in."

"That's if I can turn my brain off long enough to fall asleep," he said, finishing off with a giant yawn.

"Doesn't look like you'll have any trouble."

Peter patted Robby's back as they approached the door, then drew his gun and jumped to the side. Robby immediately followed suit.

"What's wrong?" Robby whispered.

Peter pointed at the door. It wasn't shut all the way. He pushed it open and waited. When there was no response, Robby entered, and the two men fanned out.

Inside, it was quiet and dark. A small lamp lit one corner of the room, but the shade was askew, casting long shadows across the floor. A pool of what looked like blood shimmered in the light. Robby moved in and crouched down to check it, then continued through the room with his stomach in a knot.

Broken wood was strewn everywhere, and most of the furniture had been torn to pieces.

When the two men converged on the far end of the room, Robby tapped the top of his head and pointed to a dark area under the loft. Peter got into position to cover him as he moved in.

He passed by the only wardrobe left intact when a blood-curdling scream ripped through the air, and the door of the closet flew open, smashing into his shoulder. The force made him drop his weapon, and a figure jumped on top of him with arms flailing. His body was hammered with blows and scratches. He blocked what he could and tried to throw his assailant off, but every time he shoved, the person sprang back.

A shot pierced the air, and the thumping stopped long enough that Robby was finally able to shove one way and roll the other, grabbing his gun off the floor as he jumped to his feet.

"Don't shoot!" Peter yelled, running between the two. "Su, it's Peter." He dropped to his knee in front of her.

She was crouched like a wild animal, ready to attack, but blinked away the crazed look in her eye.

"Peter?"

"Yeah. Peter and Robby. Are you okay? What happened in here? Are

Jemi and Hannah safe?”

“No.” She shook her head hard. “No. No. No. I’m so sorry.” She fell back against the wardrobe and sobbed. “I should have stopped them. It’s my fault. I should have done more. I was a coward.”

“Who? What happened?”

“They took them. I fought them off, then ran. I got away but snuck back in. But I was a coward. All I could do was hide.”

“You’re not a coward. You did the right thing. They would have taken you too, or worse.”

“You said Hannah and Jemi were taken?” Robby said after holstering his weapon. “They weren’t killed?”

“No, not here. But it would have been better if they were. What they’ll do... I’m so sorry, Peter.”

“Hey.” He reached out for her, but she flinched away.

“No. I saw them. They beat Jemi. She fought back. She didn’t give in. Not for a second.”

“Do you know how long ago this was?”

“What time is it now?”

“Three in the morning.”

“Over an hour, at least. It wasn’t that long after you left. I didn’t even hear them come in.”

“We have to find them,” Robby said, turning in a circle, his breathing heavy as he searched for an answer. “Somehow, they knew we were here. Maybe that can offer a clue to where they are now, unless you saw something, Su Su?”

“Wait. No, I didn’t see anyone clearly, but I can help.” She jumped to her feet and ran for the stairs, taking them two at a time.

“What is it?” Peter said as he raced up behind her. Robby was right behind him.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t thinking straight before. I panicked,” Su Su said, sitting in front of the computer as her fingers sped along the keys, closing down the security footage and bringing up another program. “I didn’t see who any of the individuals were, but they’re connected to the militia that’s set up nearby. They won’t have gone far.”

“Are you sure?” Robby asked.

“Am I sure? No. There were others with them too. Westerners. It doesn’t matter. I can find them.”

“How? Did you put a tracking device on their car?”

“Better than that.” She sat back when a map displayed on the screen. “There. That’s them. They’re still moving.”

“How?” was all Robby could say.

“The keychains I gave you weren’t only a gift. I wanted to keep you safe while you were here. I almost didn’t do it. I thought I was being overprotective.”

“You gave us all tracking devices?” Robby laughed. “That’s why you said we’d better keep them on us at all times. But how did you know?”

“I didn’t. God always does. Can you save them?” She pointed at the screen. “They’re both together and still moving.”

“We’ll save them, or we’ll die trying,” Peter said. “Su Su, you keep in contact, and let us know where to stop.”

“You make them pay, Peter. You bring Jemi home, and you make sure they pay.”

“Don’t worry. You know I would die for her.”

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Hannah grunted and tried to lift her head but stopped when a sharp pain radiated down her back. She tried to touch her head with her hand but couldn’t.

She whimpered as memories filtered through her mind, unraveling the fog and reminding her what had happened. Someone had broken in. Someone was after them, and—She blinked, but her eyes were fuzzy. Her arms strained to move again but wouldn’t cooperate.

“Hannah?” a woman’s voice whispered. It was familiar, but the sound bounced around in her head, and she didn’t know if what she was hearing was only a memory. They’d killed Jemi.

Hannah’s head sagged farther when she recalled the gunshot she’d heard.

She tried again to lift her head, and her stomach lurched. “Jemi.” The name fell from her lips like a dirge. “Jemi.”

“Hannah?”

Hannah held her breath, listening. Someone *was* saying her name. Maybe she was safe. She tilted her head to the side, taking slow breaths to steady the dizziness. The figure nearby was indistinct at first, but the details slowly

came into focus.

“Jemi? It is you. It can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“You’re dead. I thought they killed you.”

“Not quite.”

Hannah felt faint and dropped her head back down. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“It’s okay. Take your time. Relax and focus. And keep breathing. You got a concussion. Those take time to recover from.”

“It wasn’t this bad when Robby knocked me out.”

“Robby knocked you out? When?”

“When he thought I was the one behind the trouble over here. I was trying to escape.”

“And I thought Peter gave me a hard time. My guess is Robby went a little easier on you than whoever it was that knocked you out this time. I was worried. You’ve been unconscious for a long time.”

“My neck hurts a lot.”

“It should. It’s been hanging for a while. Don’t rush it. Just do what you can.”

Hannah stretched her head slowly to one side, then the other. “Do you know where we are?”

“No.”

“Do you know what they want with us?” Her voice wavered.

“Don’t be afraid. This is not the time to panic. You can do that later. Once we’re safe. Right now, I want you to save your energy.”

“You think we’ll make it out of here?”

“Not really. But we won’t know until we try, right? God’s gotten me out of far worse situations before. What’s one more?”

“Right.”

Hannah finally lifted her head enough to look at Jemi properly.

“You’re bleeding! What did they do to you?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about me.”

“Are you okay?”

“If we make it out of here, I will be. But right now, I need you to focus. I’ll do everything I can to get us to safety, but I need you to be prepared for what’s coming. If you go into shock, that’s normal. Passing out isn’t a bad thing, but you have to trust me for as long as you can. I need every ounce of

trust you can muster.”

“What does that mean?”

“If they haven’t killed us yet, it’s because they want information.”

“We don’t know anything.”

“Not what they want.”

“Do you think they’ll torture us?”

“Yes.”

“But we don’t know anything!” Hannah thrashed against her restraints, ignoring the pain that shot through her body.

“Hey! Calm down. Settle down. I know this is hard. But I’m here.”

Hannah sniffed against her tears, then took several deep breaths. “I’m sorry. I don’t know if I can take this. I thought I was scared with Robby, but I had no idea what it was really like.”

“I know. But we have Jesus. I want you to close your eyes and bow your head.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to pray.”

“Oh. Okay.” Hannah nodded and lowered her head.

“Jesus, we commit ourselves to you in our hour of need. We need your strength and your wisdom. We need your grace. Protect us now, and use this time to glorify your name. Let us be a light in a dark place. Amen.”

“Amen.”

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## Chapter 24

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“DO you have any kind of a plan? Is there anything I can do to help?” Hannah said after they’d been quiet for several minutes.

“In situations like these, it’s best to see what opportunities open up. To see if God opens a door for us to walk through.”

“What do I do if He doesn’t?”

“Answer their questions as best as you can. It’s okay if you show weakness. That won’t matter. You don’t have to pretend to be stoic or brave. Just be yourself, but trust in God.”

“Should I try to tell them what they want to hear?”

“There’s no point. Being honest with them won’t make things worse, and if they believe you, then —”

“Then what?”

“Nothing.”

“Then they’ll kill me quickly?”

“Try not to think about it.”

“Jemi?”



“Yeah?”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You’re asking because you want to be prepared?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think Jesus did as he carried his cross on his back? He knew what was about to happen, and I couldn’t imagine worse than that.”

“He would have been focused on His Father.”

“Yes. And you don’t need to know what the worst could be. All you need to do is focus on your Father.”

“Okay.”

“There is one other thing.”

“What?”

“Only speak when you’re spoken to. Don’t waste your words, and don’t offer anything that’s not asked for.”

“Okay. I’ll try to remember.”

“Also.”

“There’s more?”

Jemi smiled. “If I get us free, make sure you do whatever I tell you without question. Understood?”

“If you get us free, I’ll do whatever you want for the rest of my life.”

“Otherwise, I’ll see you in paradise.”

“I have to keep that at the forefront of my mind. This isn’t forever. Whatever pain I’m about to face won’t last. There is joy following. I just have to make it through.” She whimpered. “I don’t want to do this.”

“Hey, shhh. It will be okay. I promise. We’ve got Jesus, remember? We’re not alone. When you lose all of your strength, you will have His to rely on. You must believe that.”

Hannah started hyperventilating. “I know, but —”

“Look at me. Slow down your breathing. Don’t forget to speak to God. Focus on Him. Can you do that?”

She nodded and stared at a spot on the floor, gaining back control. Then the door opened.

“Focus on God, not them,” Jemi said quickly as several men entered.

Two of them had assault rifles, and Hannah gasped when she recognized the third as he entered followed by another man.

Pike crossed his arms and shook his head. “I told them I didn’t believe them when they said you were here.” He looked at the ceiling and sighed. “I

tried to protect you, Hannah. This wasn't how I wanted things to go. I didn't want this for you. You didn't deserve this, but you wouldn't give in."

"So this is my fault?" Seeing Pike gave her hope. He wouldn't let them hurt her. He may not be a good man, but he'd never let her suffer.

"Why did you come to Burma? Why couldn't you leave it alone?"

"Someone broke into my house and tried to kill me, and I'm supposed to ignore it?"

"That was not my call, but you lied to me."

"About what?"

"I did everything in my power to help you, but after what happened with Robby, I ran out of time. I have to say, you two looked very comfortable with one another."

"You were there?"

"I saw the photos. You gave them no choice. What did you expect them to do?"

"All we're trying to do is help the kids that you are hurting."

"Please. He's using that nonsense to get in your pants the same way I was."

"Is this going somewhere?" Jemi asked. "Why don't you tell us what you're after?"

"I'm only in Burma because Henry sent me to make sure things were ticking along smoothly and that there were no hiccups to the next phase. But then you guys turned up, and now we have to deal with you." He threw up his arms. "I mean, Hannah, what were you thinking coming here?"

"TreadCraft is supposed to be helping people," she said.

"And I warned you to stay out of it. What happened to the nice little Christian girl? Huh? Shouldn't you be at home knitting or reading Bible stories or something? Put together some care packages for the needy. What is wrong with you?"

"I don't knit."

"It's a real pity. This is going to be such a waste of a pretty face. You know they'll kill you, right? This isn't a game."

"Why don't you tell them not to?"

"That's not up to me. You did this to yourself and your friend." He nodded toward Jemi. "Whoever she is."

"My name's Jemila. I'm curious to know how you knew we were here."

"We saw you the moment you arrived. We have a contact at the airport

who flagged you.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “This is so screwed up.”

“You have to tell them to let us go,” Hannah said. “We don’t know anything. Tell Henry.”

Pike closed his eyes. “You are so naïve. You think Henry is the one calling the shots? This goes way deeper than TreadCraft. You’ve gotten yourself in the middle of something too big for you, and there’s nothing I can do to help you. This isn’t about some local militia. This is the creation of a paramilitary organization.”

“So you’re a terrorist now?”

“I’m a man who saw an opportunity and jumped on it.”

The man who entered behind Pike had been leaning against the table, looking amused. Now, he moved in.

“Satisfied?” he said to Pike.

“I don’t suppose you can let her off easy, Zin? I don’t care what you do with the other one, but if you could kill Hannah quickly, I’d consider it a personal favor. She doesn’t have anything valuable to offer you.”

“Except I don’t owe you any personal favors. She came over here with this group in order to stop us. I’d say that qualifies her for our interrogation methods. Unless you’d like to take her place?”

Pike gave him a sour look.

“On the other hand,” Zin continued. “If you really care for her, there are options available.”

“Such as?”

“There are rooms down the hall. This building houses soldiers from time to time. We have beds. It’s nothing fancy, but if you’d like to take her in there to say goodbye, that can be arranged. That’s the best I can do. I have orders. Up to you.”

Hannah tasted the bile that rose in her throat while Pike considered the offer.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jemi said. “I know I’m not as young as I used to be, but I’ve still got moves.”

Hannah stared at the floor, trying not to react. Jemi must have a reason for saying it, but it sent a shiver through her.

“You said you house soldiers here. They must get lonely. Why waste our talents by torturing us?”

“You are agreeable to this?” Zin said.

“Why not? I’d rather that than torture.”

“The torture will still come—although, if you perform well, we may take it easy on you. Still, you’d only be delaying the inevitable, and these men can be rough.”

“Delay is not as good as freedom, but if it’s the best you’re offering, I’ll take it.”

“We have a group coming in soon. I’m sure they’d appreciate a warm body in their beds.”

“It’s settled then.”

“Pike?” Zin said. “You want to save the young one for yourself, or should I put her out for whoever?”

“I won’t let those men touch her.”

“Whatever soothes your conscience. Just don’t forget we’ll still kill her in the end. Don’t get too attached. And don’t get all sentimental and try to break her out of here, or you’ll get yourself killed. I’ll personally make sure of that. That goes for you too,” he said to Jemi. “If you think this will give you an opportunity to escape, you are gravely mistaken.”

“Do I look like I know how to escape?”

“I’ve learned not to underestimate anyone in this line of work. Desperation pushes people to do stupid things. Don’t be one of them.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. Then we’ll leave you and get everything arranged.”

“I know you said to trust you,” Hannah said after the men left. “But why did you do that?”

“Because it will either give us a chance to escape if one is possible, or it will ease your suffering. I could see on Pike’s face he wouldn’t let you be with anyone but him. Because you are a captive, he considers you to be his personal possession. I expect your suffering will be minimal.”

“Do you really believe there’s any chance of escape? I don’t think Pike will hurt me, but I can’t imagine—Jemi, don’t do this. If you can’t get away...I don’t even want to think about what they’ll do to you. You can’t let them defile you like this. Not when you have a choice.”

Jemi frowned, and it was the saddest Hannah had ever seen her.

“It’s not the first time.”

“What?”

“I was kidnapped a long time ago, along with several other women. We were held captive in Iraq, and we were mistreated. I used the men’s affection

for us to finally escape. With Peter's help in the end."

"Peter was there?"

"It's how we met."

"How have I never heard this story? So they—you've had to endure this all before?"

"Use Pike's guilt against him, and he may not even touch you. If I can get to you, I will."

"Jemi."

"It will be okay."

Hannah licked her lips. "But what if he does...something?"

Jemi's eyes drifted to the floor. "Then I am sorry. We can pray that he doesn't, but God will help us through. No matter what."

"When my dad died, I was there. I saw it."

"I know."

"I had never felt so helpless in my entire life. I prayed and prayed that God would do something—I don't know if I can go through that again. I can tell myself that God is here, but my heart struggles."

"That is why the Bible tells us to not lean on our own understanding. It's not about how you feel. It's about what you know the truth to be. Are you willing to stand on the truth?"

"I think so. I'll try."

"Good. I'll be praying for your safety."

"And I'll be praying for yours."

Jemi nodded. "We should sing a hymn."

"Now?"

"It's what Paul and Silas did when they were in the darkest part of the dungeon. It's what I did with the women to keep them from despair."

"What hymn should we sing?"

"Do you know 'How Great Thou Art'?"

"Of course."

"*Oh Lord, my God.*" Jemi had a rich, deep voice that filled the room. "*When I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made.*" It took Hannah several lines before her voice stopped trembling, and she felt her heart strengthen. She clung to the feeling, knowing it probably wouldn't last, but it warmed her now. She welcomed the freedom from fear for as long as it lasted and wondered if it's what Paul and Silas had felt.

As they continued to worship, her mind went back to the moment when

she'd known her dad was gone. At the time, she'd said Jesus's name over and over again as the men and boys had stood over her father, watching him cough up blood. They'd waited until he breathed his last breath, and all she could do was watch in silence, unable to help.

They finished the song, and, without taking a breath, Hannah continued with another, skipping to the third verse of Amazing Grace. The one she needed the most.

*“The Lord hath promised good to me, His word my hope secures; He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.”*

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## Chapter 25

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THE DOOR OPENED, and Hannah's resolve faltered as Zin came into the room with his hands on his hips. He focused on Jemi and sighed, then turned to a small woman who had entered behind him.

"Clean her up. But don't take too long."

As the woman reached for Jemi's face with a wet rag, Jemi looked her in the eyes. The woman trembled as she wiped away the blood.

"What's your name?" Jemi said.

"Don't talk to her." Zin walked over and kicked the leg of her chair. "You're not here to make friends."

A man appeared in the door. "They're ready."

"Good." He slapped the woman in the back of the head. "You're done here. Get out."

Hannah could see the twitch in Jemi's cheek as she clenched her teeth. Her eyes burned into Zin. "Let's get this over with," she said with a snarl.

"I thought you were looking forward to it. Why the sudden change of heart?"

“No one in their right mind would look forward to this.”

“I suppose that’s true. But don’t forget, if you try anything at any time, we will shoot you in the leg and cut off your arms. That way, we can keep you alive long enough to torture you. Understood?” He looked at each of them until they nodded. “Good. You first.” He pointed at Jemi.

Another man untied her while two others waited with their guns ready.

She rubbed her wrists as she walked to the door but pushed her shoulders back. Before exiting, she turned to Hannah and gave her a gentle nod, and then Zin shoved her into the hall.

“You’re next.” He waited at the door as they dragged Hannah out and pulled her down the hall in time to see Jemi enter a nearby room.

Hannah tried to breathe through the panic that bit at her as she neared the door waiting for her. When they reached it, she saw the room was empty and stumbled forward when the barrel of a rifle was pressed into her back.

“Have fun,” Zin said, before closing and locking the door.

She looked around, relieved Pike wasn’t waiting for her. It gave her time to get control over herself.

A thin mattress was in one corner with a dingy blanket strewn haphazardly across it.

“Make him not want to touch me,” she prayed. “I’m not going to be strong enough for this.” She thought of Jemi in the other room with a stranger. “And protect Jemi. Let her find a way out.” The thought that she’d been through this all before and survived was a small comfort. If Jemi could do it, Hannah could.

After taking another look at the mattress, she huddled into the corner farthest away from it, wrapping her arms around herself.

Then the door opened, and Pike appeared. He nodded to someone outside, then entered. At first, he stood still, watching her with a frown. Then his gaze slid to the bed.

“I don’t like to beg for my dinner,” he said, taking a few more steps into the room. “There are plenty of beautiful women in the world who would gladly offer themselves to me willingly.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked over to the mattress, kicking it. “I could have given you better than this. Did I not make my invitation plain enough? Or do I repulse you? Because that would be a first.”

“I knew exactly what you wanted. It’s not what I wanted.”

“You’ve always thought you were too good for me.”



“No. I knew we had different values. Although I didn’t realize how deep that chasm was until now.”

“If you weren’t so full of yourself, you wouldn’t be in this situation now. But Hannah Reynolds always thinks she knows best.”

“It has nothing to do with knowing best.”

“Then why are you here?”

“How can you not see the evil that this is? I always knew we saw the world differently. But I didn’t think you were capable of this.”

“What? Evil? That’s what you think I am? I already told you, this is not my choice for you. You’re lucky I’m the one in here instead of someone else. You should be thanking me.”

She scoffed, and it made him flinch. “And what about the kids and the innocent people in the villages who are being brainwashed, who are dying because of you?”

“I have nothing to do with that. All that stuff you’ve been fighting against, that’s not the part I play.”

“How can you say that? You know exactly what they’re doing, and you’re helping them do it whether you pull the trigger or not.”

“I handle the paperwork and some logistics, but this is only about money for me.”

“You think that makes you innocent?”

“Why do you have to be so self-righteous all the time? I tried to help you, Hannah. I did everything I could to save you from yourself, but no, you had to be Mother Teresa.”

“The fact that you see that as a bad thing speaks volumes about how depraved you are.”

“Well, if I’m depraved, then you’re a raving lunatic. What planet do you live on, huh? You don’t get anything in this world by doing good.” He moved in on her. “You could have had anything you wanted out of life, and you chose this.”

“Yes. And you are choosing to let them kill me.”

“If I could have my way, I’d send you home immediately. You have to know that.”

“And what about the kids? The schools?”

“When the kids join the militia, they get more than they do from the village.”

She scowled. “Is that what you really think?”

“It’s the truth if you’d just wake up.”

“Does that help you sleep at night?”

“Yeah, actually, it does.”

“And what about Jemi?”

“Is that the lady you’re with?”

“Yes.”

“Is she the one who got you mixed up in all of this?”

“No. I got her mixed up in it. She’ll die because of me.”

“Then that’s on you. You’re the one who pretends to be perfect. I have never led anyone to believe I’m a saint, but you, you think you’re special because your conscience is so pure? You think you’re better than me? You’re going to die here and find out that there is no God, and for what?”

“Or maybe one day, you’ll die and find out there is.” Her voice was low and cold.

He leaned in closer. His breath smelled minty. “Why do you keep fighting so hard? You’re trapped. It’s over. You’ve lost, and we’ve won. The faster you accept that, the easier it will be for you.”

“Get away from me.”

He started to draw back, then stopped. “What if I say no?”

“Don’t touch me.”

He lifted a hand to twist a strand of her hair around his finger, then he ran it down the side of her face. “You’re in no position to demand anything. I can’t save your life, but I can make this easier on you.”

She batted his hand away, and he grabbed her wrist.

“Always so defiant. Every time. Were you this hard on Robby? Or did you give yourself to him because you have similar values, hmm?”

“There is nothing going on between me and Robby. That was to hide the fact that I was snooping around in your office. You’re the reason I’m here. I found evidence of your involvement, and it led us here.”

She tried to move sideways, but he blocked her into the corner. “It led you right to me. That’s for sure. You know, when I came in here, I didn’t know what to do with you. But all this banter has got me thinking. You’re dead anyway.”

“Don’t do this. Please. This isn’t who you are. You have always treated me with dignity and respect.”

“Now we’re best friends, huh?” She tried to wrestle away from him, but he wouldn’t let her go. “Don’t pretend you know me. I treated you the way

you wanted because I wanted something from you.”

“I don’t believe it. You’re a good person, Pike. Please.”

“And you’re no different from me. Telling me what you think I want to hear to get something back. Maybe we’re more similar than you’d care to admit.”

His grip tightened, hurting her arms. “Please,” she begged. “You said you wouldn’t do this.”

“There’s something about you, Hannah. You got under my skin, and it hurts to think that I’ll never get a taste simply because of your stupid decisions.” He leaned in and brushed his lips along her face.

She squeezed her eyes closed and prayed.

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Jemi was sitting on the mattress when two men entered her room.

“Looks like I’m going to have a busy night.” She smiled and patted the bed beside her. “Who’s first?”

The two men looked at each other. One spoke in Burmese. Then they both laughed.

Jemi stood, keeping her sultry smile. She’d have to move fast. She hadn’t been expecting two.

*Lord, you need to remind my reflexes and my muscles how to respond.*

The only thing she had going for her was that they wouldn’t be expecting a captive, especially one her age, to fight back. But if she didn’t get them both down quickly, she’d lose that edge and probably the fight.

After pushing the collar of her shirt over her shoulder, she lifted a finger, beckoning the two closer.

When they moved in, she cleared her mind and gave in to her training, launching forward to chop the first man in the neck. Then she elbowed the second in the temple. They were stunned, which gave her the time to add a couple of kicks until they were both on the ground. Before they could rise, she attacked again and again until they were out cold.

Breathing hard, she looked up at the ceiling and nodded in thanks to her Father, then dragged the two men out of view of the door before she went back to it and knocked. There would be guards waiting out there. Her body had to hold on a little longer.

“We’ve talked it over and thought you should join us,” she purred through the door. “We’re just getting started, so you haven’t missed any of the fun.” When no one entered, she said. “Okay. Your loss.”

She stood back and waited. Finally, the door opened slowly. When the guard entered and didn’t see anyone, he stepped in farther, and Jemi struck. After two quick blows, he was down, and another guard entered. She pulled the gun from the first guard and shot the second, then waited to make sure no more were coming. Once she was confident she was safe, she fell against the wall in exhaustion.

“Just a little more,” she prayed before pushing off to check the hall. It was empty.

She hurried to the next room where she hoped Hannah would be and listened. She could hear arguing. When she opened the door, Pike had Hannah pushed up against the wall.

“Hey.” She pointed the gun. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Pike turned. He looked confused for a moment, then pushed off Hannah, holding his hands up. “You don’t have to shoot me. I wasn’t going to do anything.”

“Liar,” Hannah said.

He turned to her, and she punched him in the face, bloodying his nose.

“Ouch.” She shook out her hand. “Is that supposed to hurt so much?”

“It’s a shock if you’ve never done it before, but you get used to it,” Jemi said, then rested against the door frame.

“Are you okay?” Hannah rushed over to her as Pike remained still, holding his nose.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been in a fight. I did okay with the four guys back there.”

“Four?”

“Yeah. I’d rather avoid any more if possible, but there may be more coming if they heard the gunshot.”

“What do we do with him?”

“Did he hurt you?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

Pike scoffed, then put his free hand up when they both turned to him. “I’ll stay here. I promise. I won’t raise the alarm.”

“No, you won’t.” Jemi walked up to him, hitting him over the head with the rifle. “That should be enough to take him out of the chase for a while.”

Hannah breathed deeply as she looked at his prone body. “He’s still alive?”

“Yeah. I don’t like to kill if I can help it. Besides, it’s almost better if he goes back home and has to pay for his sins over there. I don’t think he’ll like prison much.”

Hannah nodded. “We should get out of here.”

When they entered the hall, Hannah kept close to Jemi’s back. “Where are the others?”

“They’re in my room.”

“I can’t believe you took out four of them.”

“Not bad for an old lady.”

“I wouldn’t call you old, but that’s impressive for anyone.”

“We can thank God for that. I do have a few skills up my sleeve, but it’s been a while. He’s looking after us. But remember, stay close, and do whatever I tell you to.”

“Got it. Whatever you say.”

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## Chapter 26

---

PETER AND ROBBY pulled off the road near a compound where Su Su had directed them.

Peter sighed. “I was hoping it would be easier to get into, like that last place.”

“You’re not up to the challenge?”

Peter responded by slapping his arm. “We’d better get our gear out. I doubt they have much time.”

“Yeah, sorry. I don’t mean to make light of our situation, but it’s the way I handle stress.”

“Don’t apologize. I need a bit of lightening. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this kind of acute anxiety.”

“Even worse than a week ago when Jemi was sick in bed?”

“That was a dread of another kind. A slow burn. This is different, but we can’t afford to get emotional.”

“If at any time you feel yourself unraveling, you let me know. I care about Hannah and Jemi, and I want to get them safe, but I’m not invested as

heavily as you are.”

“I’m all right for now, just...keep an eye on me.”

“I’ve got your back.”

---

Jemi led Hannah through several corridors before they heard footsteps. One man shouted at another, and their voices grew louder as they approached.

“Quickly.” Jemi pushed Hannah back the way they’d come. “We need to find somewhere to hide.”

They tried several doors before they found one that was unlocked. Once inside, Jemi stood by the door, keeping it open a crack, listening.

Hannah pressed herself against the wall beside her. She had to remind herself that they’d made it this far, but the idea that they would be discovered made her want to rip her skin off.

“They’ve gone past,” Jemi said.

Hannah slumped in relief. “Thank you, God.” She looked around the room. Now that the threat was gone, she noted the computers and piles of folders that were in there.

“Coast is clear. Let’s go,” Jemi said.

Hannah had moved to a table and rifled through some paperwork. “Give me sec.”

“We don’t have a sec. We have to go now.”

“Just...” She quickly scanned the papers, then pushed them aside and looked at another pile.

“What are you doing?” Jemi hissed. “We have to go. Now. There isn’t time.”

“They’ve dumped all of this here. Why would they have done that? It looks like they’ve moved it and haven’t had a chance to put it away.”

“Or it could be trash. Let’s go.”

“There might be something here we need,” Hannah whispered while she continued to search.

“It’s not worth finding anything if we can’t get out of here alive.”

“But this could be what stops them. This could be how we get them.”

“We can send Peter and Robby back for it later, or we can bring in a larger team. This is too much for the two of us.”

“But it could be gone by then.”

Jemi marched over to her. “What did I say to you before?”

“To do whatever you say.” But she kept looking.

Jemi pushed her arm across the desk, shoving the papers onto the floor. “Let’s go.” She pulled Hannah toward the door.

“Wait.” Pulling from Jemi’s grip, she went back to the pile on the floor. *Please, God, let whatever I take be what we need.* She scooped up several files, tucking them into the back of her pants, then grabbed the closest laptop.

“Hannah! Stop it.”

“I’m coming.”

“Leave the laptop behind.”

“I can’t. I can carry it. Let’s just go.”

Jemi growled but led them back into the hall.

As they approached an intersection, they heard a shout from behind.

“Hey!”

Both women halted and turned slowly. Pike was aiming a shotgun at them. The side of his face was coated in blood from the wound on his head.

“I can’t let you go.” He adjusted his grip and walked closer.

“Pike, what are you doing?” Hannah said. “You’ll only get yourself killed. We left you alive back there. We didn’t have to. Let us go.”

“I can’t.” His voice shook, but the cold look in his eye spoke more to it being adrenaline than fear.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“You’re the one who’s stupid. There are too many guards here. You won’t get away. Give up now.”

Jemi shifted her finger to the trigger. “There aren’t enough guards to keep us from escaping. You should listen to Hannah. You don’t have to do this. This isn’t you. This isn’t your war. Let us go. This won’t end well for you.”

“You’re wrong. There’s only one way this ends. Put your gun down, or I will be forced to shoot.”

“You put your gun down. I’m a better shot than you. You can’t fire before I do.”

Shouts came from somewhere else in the building, and Pike’s eyes lifted. Jemi took advantage of his moment of distraction and fired. Pike dropped to the floor.

Part of Hannah wanted to go to him and make sure he was okay. But it only took a moment for her entire life to transform. Just like when her dad



was killed. Nothing was the same anymore, but Hannah didn't like that Pike's staring dead eyes were a good thing.

"I'm sorry," Jemi said. "I had to do it."

"I know. Let's just go."

"I can't convince you to put down the laptop and take Pike's gun instead?"

"I don't know how to fire a gun."

"Doesn't really matter in a place like this."

"Let's go. Someone will have heard the shot."

"Stay behind me, but be ready to defend yourself. Don't be afraid to use the laptop as a weapon if required."

Hannah frowned.

"Don't give me that look. I need to get us out of here alive. That's our main objective."

"I know. Don't worry, our lives are more important to me than this information."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll do what I need to do."

They turned down another hall, and, as they neared the end, Jemi turned back toward the way they'd come, grabbing Hannah and shoving her behind before firing on the two guards who rounded the corner.

"How'd you know they were there?"

"You didn't hear them? They must have found Pike's body and maybe the others. We have to hurry."

"How many men do you think are in the building?"

"Too many. There's always too many."

When they reached a door, Jemi opened it a crack, checking for anyone before moving down the dark corridor.

Two more guards came around the corner, and Jemi pulled the trigger but jerked it toward the ceiling as it fired, sending the bullet into the ceiling.

"Peter!" She ran forward.

Hannah's legs nearly gave way as she recognized Peter and Robby. "I can't believe it," she said, joining them. "We almost shot you. I can't believe you're here."

Jemi squeezed her husband tightly, then released him.

Peter checked her over. "This is oddly familiar," he said with a sideways grin. "Except last time, you didn't fall into my arms. But we shouldn't keep

running into each other like this.”

“We don’t have time for reminiscing. I’m sure the whole place has been alerted to our escape by now.”

“Was that you firing your weapon before?” Robby said. “We heard the shots.”

“Yeah. Gave ourselves away, I’m afraid.”

“This way,” Peter said.

Jemi scoffed. “Since when are you our leader? Let’s not make the same mistake we did before.”

“You’re really going to do this now?”

A figure came into the hall, and everyone raised their weapons.

“I should have known,” Zin snarled. “I thought it was impossible that I could underestimate you, but I was wrong. A mistake I will rectify.”

“You can’t kill all of us,” Robby said, pulling Hannah behind him.

“I’ve given my life to this cause,” Zin said. “You think I care about my mortal body? I know where I’ll go when I die. I know the riches I will possess in the next life. It has been an honor serving, but my goal has always been what I will go to next.”

Robby and Peter fired at the same time Zin did.

Zin fell to the ground, dead, as Jemi grunted and staggered back.

“No!” Peter grabbed her.

“Nice shooting,” she said, her voice slurred in pain. “Both of you. But why aren’t you running for the exit?”

“You’ve done enough on this trip. It’s time to let me take the reins for once.” He pulled her hand away from her side. “Maybe we got lucky, and it didn’t hit anything.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll only slow you down,” she said softly, looking into his eyes. “Take Hannah and go. Get her out of here. Maybe this was the whole reason God brought me back. To make sure the rest of you get out of here alive.”

Peter cupped her cheek. “My love, do you really think there is any way on God’s green earth that I would ever leave you here?”

She smiled. “No. But I needed to state the obvious.”

“I almost lost you to cancer. There is no way I’m going to let a bullet be the thing that separates us now.”

“You want me to carry her?” Robby said.

Peter glared at him. “I’ve got it. You shoot the bad guys, and Hannah,

you stay in the middle.”

“No one’s carrying me,” Jemi said, trying to push onto her feet.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Peter lifted her easily, and they started forward.

“Hang on,” Hannah said. “What if someone turns up behind us?”

“Let’s trade.” Peter turned to expose the gun at his hip.

“But I’ve never fired a weapon before.”

“I’m sorry to do this to you, but it’s already loaded. Keep it pointed at the ground and only put your finger on the trigger when you’re ready to fire. Please, Hannah. I need your help.”

“Give me the laptop,” Jemi said. “Hurry.”

Hannah huffed but obeyed. She laid the computer carefully in Jemi’s arms and pulled the gun from Peter’s belt, holding it like it was diseased.

Robby wrapped her fingers around the grip and tightened his own on hers. “You can do this. Let’s go.”

“Don’t think about it. Just…” Jemi laid her head on Peter’s shoulder.

“Time to go,” Robby said, leading the way, while Hannah followed behind, checking over her shoulder. Her hands were shaking and sweaty.

When Robby fired his weapon, she jumped, swinging her gun around and taking aim, but they were all down before she could do anything.

“The exit is right up here.”

After shooting the three men who were outside, Robby got Peter, Jemi, and Hannah out the door while he watched the hall behind them. He took out the guard that came around the corner, glad Hannah didn’t have to face him.

“You guys stay here. I’ll go get the gate open.”

He disappeared into the dark, and Peter lowered Jemi to the ground. “I can take the gun while we—Hannah!”

She turned and fired, yelping when the man dropped.

“Nice work,” he said. “Direct hit.”

The doors across the yard creaked as they opened.

“That was quick.” He lifted Jemi again. “Let’s get out of here.”

Robby gave them cover fire as more men came from the building, then he sprinted for the van, and they drove away from the spray of bullets. One shattered the back window.

“Won’t they follow us?” Hannah said, keeping her head ducked low while she applied pressure to Jemi’s wound.

“I shot out a bunch of tires. We should be fine. Anyone know how far it is to the hospital from here?”

“I’ll call Su Su and get directions,” Peter said. “And I’ll get her to meet us there.”

Jemi reached for Hannah’s hand. “You did great in there,” she said.

“I was so scared. I can’t believe it’s over.” She started to cry but stifled it. “I tried not to think about what might happen.”

“Try not to think about it now. There’ll be time later.”

“You were braver than you think in there,” Peter said. “Just make sure you talk to someone about it eventually. It’s no good to bottle it up forever.”

“I know the drill, but can we talk about our feelings later? We have more pressing matters at hand.”

“What?” Jemi said. “You mean my bullet wound? That’s nothing. I’ll be fine.” Her laugh was weak and her words slurred. Then, her eyes blinked a couple of times and closed.

“Jemi?” Hannah said, shaking her lightly. “Jemi. Wake up. We need you to stay awake.”

“Su, it’s Peter. I’m putting Robby on. You need to give him directions to the nearest hospital, fast.”

“Did you find them?” Su Su said. “What’s happening?”

“We’ve got them, but Jemi’s been shot. I’m putting Robby on.” He tossed the phone into Robby’s lap and turned his full attention to his wife. “Jemi, you hang in there. You have to hang in there for me. You can’t leave me now.” He held her hand. “Don’t leave me, Jemi. Don’t you dare. Open your eyes. Look at me.”

Hannah ran her fingers along Jemi’s neck, searching for a pulse.

“Can you find it?” Peter was frantic.

“I don’t know.” She kept looking. “I don’t know. I can’t find anything.”

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## Chapter 27

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ROBBY TOOK Hannah's hand and pulled her from the darkened hospital room. "We should give him some space."

Peter's head was resting on the side of the bed, weeping.

"You think it's okay to leave him like that?"

"He's got a lot of pent-up pain to let out. He almost lost his wife twice in less than a week. At least we can be sure it's mostly tears of relief and joy. He'll be fine. God's obviously not done with her yet."

She slipped her arm through his and pulled him against her, not caring what it might mean. She needed to be close to him right now and would work out the implications later.

"I thought I was scared when we were stuck in that compound, but when I thought Jemi had died...maybe it was the shock, but that felt worse."

"How are you feeling now?"

"I don't know. The relief of it all is overwhelming. I think there's a ton of stuff that hasn't sunk in yet. I've got a lot to sift through."

"A good rest will help. If you want, I can find a place nearby where you

can get some sleep.”

“No. I don’t want to leave the hospital. I want to stay close. If it wasn’t for Jemi, I’d be dead.”

“Those two make quite a couple.”

“You should have seen her in there. I’ve heard a lot of stories about Peter’s exploits over the years, but not many about Jemi’s. She was amazing.”

“I wish I could have seen it. But you did well too. For someone who’s never been through anything like that before, you handled yourself remarkably well.”

They stopped at a door to a vacant room, and Robby released her arm. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s using this room. You want to lie down?”

“What if they need it?”

“I’ll hang around and pull you out if things get busy. Come on. You need some sleep.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine. I’m used to it. Later, I can find a corner in the waiting room or something.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Not as awful as what you’ve just been through.”

“At least they didn’t get a chance to do anything to me.”

He took her hand. “I was afraid to ask.” His voice took on a guttural tone that suggested he was ready to kill anyone who touched her. “I might have gone crazy if they had. Might have been tempted to blow the whole place apart.”

She pressed her lips together, blinking back tears.

Robby lifted her chin. “Hey, you okay?”

“Pike was there.”

“Where? At the compound?”

“Yeah. He said Henry sent him there to make sure things were on track. Then we turned up.”

“I’d still like to know how they knew we were here.”

“They had a contact at the airport and followed us.”

“It’s that simple? Did you see him before you escaped?”

“He’s dead.”

“Oh.”

“Jemi had to shoot him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Or at least... I know it was the only way. He was going to shoot us or turn us in. He was going to—They put me in a room with him. I didn’t think he would do anything to me, but he would have if Jemi hadn’t saved me.”

Robby closed his eyes. “Then it’s good he’s dead. Otherwise, I’d find him and kill him.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“You don’t think so?”

“He wasn’t worth it. I wish he hadn’t come after us. He deserved to go to prison, but...I can’t dwell on what could or should have been. I was ready to die in there. I couldn’t see any way out. Even though I knew God could do a miracle, I didn’t expect Him to.”

“I just wish I could have gotten to you sooner.”

“I had God there to protect me.”

“I know. And because I’m a Christian now, I should find comfort in that. It’s mind-blowing for me. A few weeks ago, I would have found it an incredible feat of human ability. Or just plain lucky. But now that I can see the truth, this faith stuff is wild.”

“It is. I can’t say it happens all the time, but when it does, it’s hard to get your head around.”

“It’s impossible to get your head around. But is it weird that I’m a little jealous?”

“Of what?”

“God.”

She laughed. “Why?”

He pulled her closer. “Because I want to be the one who’s responsible for you.” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering on her face. “I know things have been intense since we met, but I’ve grown attached to you.”

Hannah bit her lip. “You don’t think it’s because of what we’ve been through?”

“Are you worried it is?”

“I don’t know what to think. And honestly, I’m too exhausted to work it out right now.”

He took a step back. “If you don’t feel comfortable, I’ll leave it.”

“Oh. Uh.” She scrunched up her face in embarrassment. “I mean.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. It was too soon. It’s the relief of having you safe that makes it hard to ignore how I feel, but now I’ve made you uncomfortable. Forget it. I’ll give you some space. We can talk about it another time.”

She reached for him when he took another step back. “No. Don’t. I don’t —” She looked up at the ceiling, trying to find the words that would fit around her lack of confidence. “I wasn’t prepared for you to be so honest with me before I’d figured out what I was going to do about you.”

He smiled uncomfortably. “I’m not sure quite how to take that.”

“It means I feel the same, but I don’t want to get this wrong.”

“Oh. Good. Well, we can take things slow.”

She nodded. “But we don’t have to take them too slow.”

The smile he gave her made her squirm against the lightheadedness she felt. It shouldn’t feel so good to see how happy she made him.

He took her hands. “Not too fast. Not too slow. Got it. Would it be inappropriate for me to kiss you right now?”

Her skin prickled in anticipation. “I don’t think you’re supposed to announce it.”

He inched closer. “So I shouldn’t?”

She looked at his lips, painfully close. “I didn’t say that,” she whispered.

“Good.” He closed the gap and walked her into the room as they kissed, his hand moving to her back to pull her closer.

Hannah let the kiss sweep her away in an explosion of emotion. The chaos of the past few weeks increased the intensity to the point where she found it hard to breathe and had to pull away.

“Sorry,” Robby said, still holding her. “That was too fast.”

“No. It wasn’t. It really wasn’t.” She pushed him back and let out a deep breath.

“I got carried away.”

“No.” She laughed. “The problem is it’s not enough, but I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do about that right now. I can’t even think straight. I lost myself. It was amazing, and overwhelming, and not enough.”

“You want me to give you some space?”

“No. Don’t. Please. But—” She pulled him back into the hall. “I don’t think we can trust ourselves to be alone right now. At least...I can’t trust myself.”

“Oh. It’s nice to know I’m not the only one. I’ve lived my life differently



from you for a long time. This is new to me.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“I want to do this right. I have never in my life met anyone like you. Whatever it takes to get this right is worth it.”

“The good news is, I’m much more awake now.”

“Then maybe we can get a coffee and check on Peter and Jemi.”

Robby’s phone rang. “It’s Su Su.” He answered, putting it on speaker. “How’re you doing? I’ve got Hannah here with me.”

“Good. Hannah’s who I’m looking for.”

“What’s up?” Hannah said.

“Since I got back from the hospital, I’ve been going through the laptop and looking through the documents you brought back.”

“Already? Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d put my time to good use. When you gave them to me, you said you didn’t know whether there was anything of value on them.”

“Yeah, I just grabbed what I could.”

“You hit the jackpot.”

“You’re kidding. You’ve found something on TreadCraft?”

“Not just TreadCraft. There are other businesses all over the world that they have connections to. This is big. This is very, very big.”

“Pike said something about a paramilitary operation.”

“Yeah. This is going to bring a lot of bad guys to justice. Wait until you see it.”

Hannah leaned back against the wall. “I can’t believe it.”

“I’ll compile what I have. Robby, do you have a contact I can forward all of this too? You’re going to need a team to execute any kind of roundup in the U.S.”

“Yeah. I’ll send it through when we hang up. Nice work, Su Su.”

“Thank you for letting me be a part of this. It means a lot.”

“You’ve been a great asset on this trip. We couldn’t have done it without you. We’ll talk soon.”

“You guys get some rest, and let me know when Jemi wakes up.”

“We will.”

Robby sent a text with the contact of his boss, then put his phone away and shook his head. “I can’t believe it.”

“We should go tell Peter. He’ll want to know.”

Robby linked his fingers in Hannah's. "Yeah. Let's tell him the good news."

---

When they got to Jemi's room, she was awake, and she and Peter were talking quietly.

"Sorry to interrupt," Robby said. "It's good to see you're back with us, Jemi."

"Come in," Peter said. "I was wondering where you two disappeared to."

Hannah blushed, and Jemi noticed. "Looks like they were making good use of their time," she said.

"Actually," Hannah glared at her playfully. "We've got some good news we wanted to share."

After they explained what Su Su had told them, Jemi held her hand up for Hannah to take.

"I wouldn't say this to anyone else," she said when Hannah sat on the edge of the bed. "But it's the one time I'm glad you disobeyed me."

"That doesn't mean it was okay for me to do. We were lucky."

Jemi shook her head. "I don't always get things right. I was too focused on getting you out of there alive and not on any kind of mission to stop the militia. You were focused on the bigger picture. Well done. You'd make a good operative."

"No way. I don't ever want to do anything like this again. Right now, I'm looking forward to a long vacation. And also, it looks like I'll need to find a new job."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Robby said. "This one isn't finished yet. Not until those responsible are arrested."

"That's true. And I wouldn't want to miss that for the world."

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## Chapter 28

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HANNAH LOOKED through the window to the porch where Robby looked uncomfortable as he fiddled with his bowtie.

She went to the door and opened it. “You made it,” she said.

He was tugging at his collar but stopped when he saw her. “Wow. You look amazing.”

She smoothed her hands down the red gown. “It’s not often I get to dress up like this.”

He looked over her shoulder. “I take it you got your back door fixed?”

“Yes, but there are still holes in the wall that need filling.”

“Sorry it’s taking so long.”

“It’s okay. The door was the main thing. As long as I can lock up, that’s all I need.”

“And you’re sleeping okay?”

“You’ve asked me that a million times since we got back. I’m fine. So, are you ready to go? I don’t want to be late for this.”

“There is one thing before we leave.” He looked somber.

“What? Is something wrong?”

“Yeah.” He pulled her to him and kissed her, then breathed in the smell of her. “I’ve been waiting a long time to do that.”

“We’ve been on four dates this week.”

“Yeah, but it’s the first time I’ve seen you today. I can’t seem to get enough of you.”

“I’m all yours tonight.”

“No, you’re not. I have to share you.”

She smiled and patted his cheek. “At least it’s for a good cause.”

“The best.”

---

As they drove into the city, Robby hooked his pinky through Hannah’s. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a tux,” he said.

“You should do it more often. You look good.”

“I only wear these things when necessary. They’re very uncomfortable.”

“But worth it.”

“If I ever do a big fundraiser, I’m going to make it beach attire.”

“You think anyone will come?”

“Why not? Who doesn’t like to wear a big sunhat and flip-flops?”

“Is it strange that I’m nervous?”

“Not at all. I know you’re looking forward to bringing this all to an end, but tonight is a big deal.”

“When I did that presentation at TreadCraft, I did it because I wanted to make a difference in these kids’ lives. I never could have imagined the enormity of what was really going on. I’m still helping kids, but on a much bigger scale. I’m so glad God knows what He’s doing and does what He needs despite our whining.”

Robby laughed. “Guess He’s big enough to handle our little tantrums.”

“Thank goodness. Have you spoken to your boss?”

“Him and the rest of the team.”

“So, everything’s in place?”

“They’re all looking forward to it. We’ve invested a lot in this.”

“I can’t wait to meet them. You know, when you think back over how everything came together.” She shook her head. “It’s hard to fathom it’s

real.”

“I guess that’s God for you. He goes above and beyond what we could ever ask or imagine.”

“Sounds like you’ve been reading your Bible.”

“I can’t believe some of the stuff in there. Have you ever read Kings?”

“A few times, yeah.”

“That’s some wild stuff that went on. And I thought the planet was out of control now.”

“It’s comforting in a way to know that not much has changed. We all still face similar obstacles. People act in the same awful ways. But no matter what, when we cry out to God, He responds.”

“He certainly does.” Robby parked in front of the valet, who opened the door for Hannah and gave Robby a ticket.

Together, they climbed the stairs where giant signs in gold lettering announced the evening’s fundraising dinner.

“I’m afraid the event has already started,” the man at the door said.

“Yes, we’re a bit late to the party.”

“Your names, please?” He looked down at his iPad.

“We’re not on the list.”

“I’m sorry, but this event is invite only.”

“Don’t worry, we’re not eating.” He walked Hannah through the door, ignoring the protests of the host.

“You can’t go in there,” the man said as he followed them inside. “I’m afraid I’ll have to call security if you don’t leave immediately.”

“There’s no need,” Robby said. “We’ve brought our own.”

He opened the double doors to the hall. Henry was at the podium, lifting his arm to showcase the images on the giant screens behind him.

Robby clapped loudly, and the room turned his way.

Henry paused mid-sentence, then said, “I’m sorry, sir, but if you don’t mind—Hannah? Is that you?” He used his hand to shade his eyes from the spotlight. “Hannah, what are you doing here? I’m sorry, but you and your friend will have to go. This is inappropriate.”

“What? I’m not invited to the party?” she said. “Is that because you thought I was dead?”

Henry laughed nervously. “Why would I think that? Uh…” He cleared his throat loudly into the mic. “Why doesn’t everyone continue to enjoy their drinks while I have a word with our unexpected guests.”

Robby checked the room and nodded when he spotted Holland, who had come in earlier in the evening as part of the security team hired for the event.

Holland nodded back and made his way to the tech booth to prepare their own pictures.

Henry climbed off the stage and closed in on Robby and Hannah with security of his own.

“Hannah, when you didn’t turn up for work, we thought you’d gotten upset about your presentation. Everyone assumed you’d quit without notice. You would have been invited, of course. I know how much this all means to you.”

“I don’t know why you’re bothering lying. You know that I’m aware of what’s going on. You know I turned up in Burma.”

“I...I guess I had heard that you arrived unexpectedly, but I don’t know anything beyond that.”

“That’s because they held up their end of the bargain over there,” Robby said. “We made sure word didn’t get back to you about Hannah’s escape. Or the documents that were seized.”

“What documents? I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“I guess that means you don’t know about Pike?” Hannah said.

“Pike’s gone on vacation.”

“Pike’s dead.”

Henry was visibly shaken by the revelation. “Why don’t we have a private chat in the room to the side there, and you can explain to me what’s going on.”

“I don’t think we should keep this private,” Robby said, raising his voice to carry to most of the room. “The work you’ve been doing in Burma is second to none. That’s what everyone has come to hear about, right? Everyone wants to know about the wonderful work you’ve been doing with the kids.”

A murmur crept through the room.

Henry’s face was bright red. “You’ll need to come with me.” He nodded to his security, and they moved closer. “It’s important we discuss this further, and there is no need to disrupt this evening. My guests have paid good money for —”

“Yes,” Hannah said as Robby’s team materialized around them. Mitchell and Green stepped up to one of Henry’s men, and Perez and Evans covered

the other. “They’ve paid good money, and they deserve to hear the truth.”

“This will go much smoother if you cooperate,” Robby whispered to Henry. He nodded to Hannah, and she smiled before making her way to the front.

“Hannah,” Henry called out to her. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but we’re in the middle of raising money for the kids you say you want to help.”

“And that’s exactly why we’re here,” Robby said. “To help the kids.”

Hannah climbed onto the stage and adjusted the microphone.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I apologize for the disruption, but I promise you it is in all of our best interests. I want to begin by thanking you all for being here tonight. You’ve come in good faith to help disadvantaged children in Burma, and I can’t tell you how much that means to me.” She paused to compose herself. “I don’t know most of you, so I’ll give you a little background. I grew up in Burma, and I saw firsthand what a lot of these kids suffer through, from the lack of education to the forced labor—and, worse, these kids have been forced to join militias, their minds broken until they do the bidding of the monsters who control them. You’ve come here tonight to put an end to that. But that isn’t why Henry is here tonight, and it’s not what TreadCraft has been doing for years.”

The first images came onto the screen, and the crowd gasped. “We have proof that TreadCraft, with the full knowledge of Henry Burns and the board of directors, has been using your money to aid in the exploitation of these children. And we’re here tonight to put an end to it all.”

---

Robby stood by the back door, his arms crossed as he watched Hannah share the truth. He was proud of her, but his focus adjusted as several people rose from their tables and headed his way.

“Excuse me,” said a woman. The first to reach him. “I need to use the restroom.”

“I’m afraid not. Emma.”

Her eyes widened. “Have we met before?”

“No. But I know who you are.”

“I demand you get out of my way, or I’ll call the police.”

“There’s no need. The feds are outside waiting for you anyway. You should stay and enjoy the show.”

She stepped back several paces, bumping into a chair before hurrying back to her seat.

Robby smiled. He hadn’t expected to enjoy this so much.

---

After Hannah was finished with her presentation, a dozen agents entered the room and rounded up the guilty parties while the rest of the audience discussed what had transpired, making calls to spread the word. It wouldn’t be long before the media got hold of it and the news exploded.

---

It was another hour before the room was cleared, and Hannah found Robby in the foyer on his own.

She walked up silently behind him and slipped an arm around him, resting her chin on his shoulder.

“Where’d you disappear to?” he said.

“I got a phone call.”

“From who?”

“You remember Sal?”

“The guy in the closet?”

“Yeah. He called to tell me he got a job. And that he’s been clean and sober all week.”

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

“I couldn’t believe it when he told me. I made him repeat it. He enjoyed giving me that surprise over again.”

“You think it will stick?”

“No idea. With Sal, it’s usually two steps forward and one back, but it’s a start. The most important thing is that he keeps trying.”

“Who is he to you anyway? You never fully explained why he means so much to you.”

“Sal was a part of the church that supported my family. He was on the board. After my dad died, he made sure my mom and I were looked after.”



“What happened?”

“His wife cheated on him and took the kids. I think he may have had the drinking problem already, but when she left, he snapped. Lost his job, his house, everything.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I know. It’s sad. I’d really like to see him get his life together. He’s got a good heart, and I know God can still use him. How have things gone here? Looks like everything’s taken care of.”

“Yeah. You didn’t miss much. It’s been a slow process. Mostly, the people who are hanging around just want to see if they can find out any more juicy details.”

She yawned. “I think tonight I’ll have the best sleep I’ve had in a while knowing Henry is behind bars.”

“Don’t get too comfortable.” He turned and pulled her into him. “Now that we’ve finally gotten to the end of this assignment, I plan on spending some quality time with you.”

“You don’t consider these past weeks quality time?”

“Yeah, but that’s been full of work talk. We should go away somewhere together, like Fiji.”

“You mean you and me?”

“Yeah.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah. If you’d like to go somewhere else for the honeymoon, I’m open to suggestions.”

She pulled back. “What?”

“What?”

“Honeymoon?”

“That’s what people do after they get married, isn’t it?”

“Did you just —”

“I know we haven’t been together long, but I’ve been around long enough to know when I want to spend the rest of my life with someone. Were you hoping for a more romantic proposal? Am I skipping ahead too fast?”

She’d thought a lot about spending the rest of her life with him, more than she’d care to admit, but was afraid it was too soon to make a decision like that. He made it sound so easy. “Fast, yes. But...”

“I like the sound of that but.”

“I don’t want to be with anyone besides you, that’s for sure.”

“I hoped you’d say that.”

“Robby!” Holland called from across the room. “We’re done here.”

Robby didn’t take his eyes off Hannah as he responded. “Got it!”

“Don’t you need to go clock out or something?” Hannah said.

“Nope. I’m waiting to hear what you have to say.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’m gonna say yes, because I definitely want to be your wife, but I’ll need time to process this.”

“I could have done the proposal better.”

“I don’t care about that. What I care about is who I spend the rest of my life with.”

“Great. ’Cause I can wait as long as you need if I know that you’re my fiancé.”

Hannah laughed. “As long as I need?”

“Yeah. But make sure it’s not too long.” He twisted her around behind a display and kissed her.

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# Epilogue

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## 20 Years Later...

HANNAH TOOK the hand of the fourteen-year-old girl who came up beside her, then looked around at all the people who had gathered at the church.

“Where are your brothers?” she said to the girl.

“Looking for a parking spot.”

“They’ll be a while then. There are more people here than I expected. I think the parking lot is full.”

“Yeah. It’s packed,” Robby said, putting his arm around his wife. “Peter invested a lot in us those early years. And judging by the crowd, he’s invested in lots of others, too.”

A woman with red hair approached them. “Hey, I don’t think we’ve met. My name’s Morgan.”

“Hi. Yes, you’re the one who organized this, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. My husband Oliver and I thought it would be worth celebrating both Peter and Jemi, and, judging by how many people made it, it looks like we’re not the only ones.”

“I’m Hannah, by the way. This is my husband Robby and our daughter

Rose. Our other two kids are on their way in.”

“It’s great to meet you. Besides this event we’re doing now, I wanted to do a video montage on the people whose lives Peter and Jemi touched. I won’t record until after the service, but I wanted to give people a heads up to prepare what they’re going to say. Would you mind sharing something later? Tell a story of how they’ve impacted your lives?”

“Of course, but how much time have you got?”

“As much time as it takes.”

“What’s it for? What do you plan on doing with it once you’re finished?”

“I’ll send out a copy to everyone here so we all have something to remember them by. Something we can pass down to our kids, even.”

Hannah nodded. “Our experience with them makes for quite a story. But I bet we aren’t the only ones.”

“I can assure you you’re not. I know a few people here, and each one of them has something amazing to share.”

“How is it that *you* know Peter and Jemi?”

“I met them through my husband.” Morgan looked around the crowd. “He’s around here somewhere—oh, right over there. I hacked into his company’s network and uncovered an assassination plot. Peter helped save us both.”

“Wait,” Robby said. “That wasn’t in Libya, by any chance?”

“You heard about it?”

“We have a similar story, minus the hacking part. But Peter mentioned it when we were headed over to Burma.”

Hannah bumped his arm. “I can’t believe you can remember that.”

“I remember not wanting you tagging along.”

Morgan laughed. “Oli didn’t want me coming either.”

“I can’t wait to hear all about it,” Hannah said. “And everyone else’s. Have you heard any of their stories?”

“Sure. You see that couple over there?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s Liam and Emily. Peter helped them stop a sex-trafficking ring. And I take it you’ve heard how Peter and Jemi met?”

“You mean when they rescued each other in Iraq?”

“That’s one way to put it. That guy over there, his name’s Sol. He’s the son of one of the women they saved back then. Sol and his wife were part of stopping this massive government corruption scheme with the help of Aaron,

who is also around here somewhere. Then Aaron helped stop a biological weapon.”

“I feel like we’re in the movies.”

“Peter always had stories to tell every time we saw him. He worked with twins running an undercover operation, mafia takedowns, and more corrupt officials. I could go on.”

“They’ll be missed.”

“They will, but it looks like their legacy will live on and probably continue to grow.”

A strong-looking man in his fifties climbed up on a table and whistled, silencing the room. “If I can have your attention, please. I won’t take long, but I wanted to say a few words before we begin. My name’s Jay Parker. Like a lot of you here, Peter and Jemi had a massive influence on me and my family’s life. I know a lot of you were at Jemi’s funeral last year, and I remember the look on Peter’s face that day. He was sad, but content, as though he knew he would be with her again soon.”

Hannah nodded. She could remember thinking the same thing.

Jay continued. “And here we are gathered around together again, celebrating all the good things they left behind them. I am privileged to be not just included in their network of friends but knowing that, one day, I’ll get to spend eternity with them.” Jay waited for affirmation from many in the crowd.

Robby took Hannah’s hand and squeezed it.

“Hey, Mom, sorry we’re late,” a voice whispered from behind. “This place is packed.”

“I’d like to begin the service,” Jay said, “by giving thanks to God for using Peter and Jemi in so many of our lives.”

The crowd bowed their heads as they lifted their thanksgiving to heaven.

When they all said amen, Hannah looked around the crowd of people and wondered how many of them owed their salvation to Peter and Jemi. God had used them to bring salvation to her husband, but he couldn’t be the only one in the room, and seeing so many was staggering.

Many times in her life, when her faith had been tested and she’d found it hard to be obedient to God, she’d remembered the two of them. Sometimes, she’d get a phone call at the right moment when she needed encouragement or a text to let her know they were thinking of her when she needed it most. And she wasn’t the only one. Today, she’d make sure she got to hear

firsthand of the others who had been impacted.

---

Late in the afternoon, Hannah looked across the room where her oldest son was talking to a girl she didn't recognize.

"Uhhh," said the woman she was speaking to. "That's a boy I haven't seen before."

"Who? The one over there talking to the tall brunette?"

"Yeah."

"That's my son."

"Interesting. That's my daughter."

"Well, Sara, it looks like they're pretty focused on each other."

"Yes."

"What's happening?" Sara's husband sat down with a huff. "I think I'm talked out."

"Hannah, this is my husband, Tom."

"Nice to meet you, Hannah. Hey, have you two noticed an especially large number of couples here who met through Peter and Jemi? It's like they were the matchmaking king and queen or something."

"I think God put them in the right place at the right time," Hannah said. "And it looks like their effect lives on." She nodded toward her son.

"Hang on, who's that talking to Lorna?" Tom said.

"My son." Hannah laughed.

"If our daughter is going to meet someone somewhere," Sara said, "what better place than here?"

"At a funeral?" Tom said.

"Why not? We're here celebrating life, aren't we? It's nice to know that even after this generation passes, when all of our names are forgotten, all of this will continue to be used by God in miraculous ways. All because Peter and Jemi made a decision from the beginning to be obedient to God's leading."

"You should say that in Morgan's video," Hannah said. "That's beautiful."

"Isn't it comforting to know that we all get to spend eternity together?" Sara shook her head. "I don't know how people do life without God, but I'm

so thankful that Peter and Jemi have brought a whole lot more into the family.”

Tom lifted the bottle of water he was drinking and toasted the air. “To Peter and Jemi.”

Both women pretend-toasted as well. “To Peter and Jemi.”

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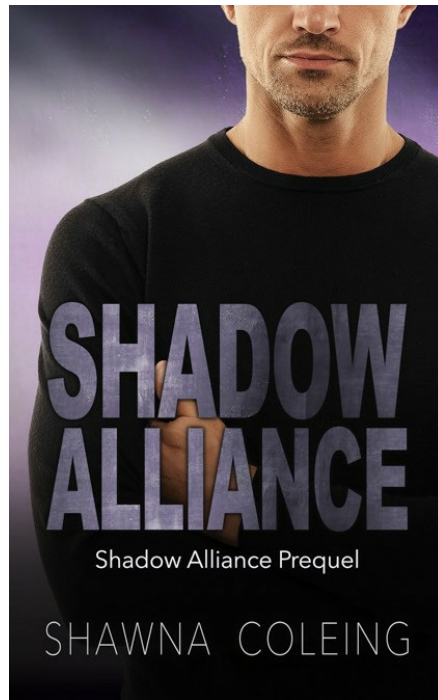
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# About the Author

Shawna Coleing is the author of the Shadow Alliance Series. You can find her on her website or feel free to contact her by email at:

[shawnacoleing@pgturners.com](mailto:shawnacoleing@pgturners.com)

Otherwise you can connect with her here:



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