



LOVE IN DANGER BOOK FOUR

EDGE OF DANGER



NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CINDY DEES

EDGE OF DANGER

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BOOK 4

CINDY DEES

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BLURB

They call him a trouble magnet. If something bad is going to happen, former Navy SEAL Ian McCloud is probably there already. At the moment, he's investigating a rogue scientist with a penchant for nasty viruses...what could go wrong?

They call her a maverick. CIA operative, Piper Roth, is the last kind of trouble Ian wants or needs. She's currently tracking a homegrown separatist group bent on giving Uncle Sam a bloody nose, and she's out to prove she can run with the big boys. This mission will make her career...as long as Ian McCloud stays out of her way.

But when their investigations collide, sparks fly and desire explodes between them. As they maneuver to one-up each other, their smoking-hot one-night-stand spells Trouble with a capital T for both of them. Now Ian and Piper must put aside their fiery attraction and join forces to stop a diabolical terrorist attack that aims to unleash a series of hellish attacks on an unsuspecting American city.

Their lives, and those of thousands of civilians, are at stake as they race to stop disaster, balanced on a razor's edge between love and danger.

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M HARTSELL, ON EDGE OF DANGER

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THE WEST BANK, JERUSALEM, ONE YEAR AGO

Yusef Abahdi looked around the street nervously, more out of habit than any sensed threat. This was perhaps the most troubled spot on the planet, after all. Out of reflexive instinct to protect, his hand came to rest on his young daughter's too thin shoulder. The street was as it always was, bright, dusty, and crowded, simmering with hostility under the everyday sounds and movements of a typical workday drawing to a close. Strange how the barrier in front of him had even become a normal part of their world. It sliced right across the street, cutting through buildings and concrete with complete disregard for architecture or function. The obscene, steel-barred fence and its razor-wire spiral blended into the landscape as easily as anything else in this unnaturally divided world.

Salima grabbed the fence's bars with her bony little hands, her face pressed to the gap. Her expression was eager and he glanced through to the Jewish neighborhood on the other side to see what so excited her.

A birthday party.

A dozen boys and girls not much older than his daughter laughed and squealed while several harassed mothers scurried around the table trying to serve cake to the squirming youngsters.

"Daddy, can I have a piece of cake?" Salima asked him hopefully.

"No, sweetie. It's not your party."

"Can I have a birthday party?"

"It's not your birthday."

"But why can't I ever have cake?"

Why indeed? A hot knife of impotence slashed into his gut, crystallizing into despair at his inability to provide for her, to even feed her adequately, let alone give her cake for her birthday. So many moments of despair like this piled one on top of another, crushing one another until, like carbon molecules compressed impossibly tight, they'd formed a kernel of diamond-hard rage within him.

"Come away, sweetheart. It's nearly time for Mommy to come home."

His wife, Marta, with a master's degree in literature, worked as a domestic for a wealthy Jewish family in the Sheikh Badr Quarter. *A maid*. And he, with his doctorate in biochemistry, was unable to get any work at all. Who would hire a Palestinian man from Ramala—a hotbed of terrorist activity—to work around hazardous chemical or biological agents? No Israeli company was foolish enough to try. The Mossad would have something to say about it for sure. He would leave this place with his family if there were anywhere else to go. But they were Palestinians. The lost people. Stateless and dispossessed half a century ago, with no country nor home to call their own.

His daughter moved away from the fence reluctantly. Marta would ride the *Egged #4* bus through the Silwah quarter to where the route ended, just shy of the Israeli checkpoint. He and Salima would walk the rest of the way home with Marta to their tiny flat in the Al-Izzariyya ghetto. And if Marta had impressed her employers with her diligence that day, perhaps they would send the remains of lunch home for her family to eat—a few stale sandwich halves, maybe some grapes or limp lettuce. If Marta had worked especially hard, perhaps there might even be an orange for Salima.

The area directly in front of the checkpoint was clear, kept that way by the threatening weapons of the IDF soldiers. The Israeli Defense Forces were surly these days. They always were when their government rumbled about new crackdowns. Or maybe it was rumbles from the Palestinian Authority threatening to turn its more violent members loose on the Israelis that did it. Either way, Yusef was careful to hold Salima's hand tight and keep her well back from the crossing.

“Here comes Mommy’s bus,” he announced as the large green shape turned the corner two blocks beyond the Israeli guard house.

“Pick me up so I can see!”

He lifted Salima under her armpits and hoisted her up in front of him.

BOOM!

The concussion knocked him completely off his feet and Salima fell across his head, further stunning him. Dust filled the air, choking and gray, tasting of concrete. Screams erupted, and his daughter’s high-pitched keening made him frantic like no sound he’d ever heard before. He scrambled to his knees, oblivious of shards of glass and sharp rubble cutting his hands and knees.

“Baby! Salima! Are you hurt?”

“Daaa—deee!” she screamed.

The back of her head bled where she’d struck the ground, and Holy God, it was bleeding a lot. But he saw no other obvious injuries. He ripped off his shirt, sending buttons flying, and wadded it against her scalp wound. He gathered her close, holding her so tight she struggled against him. He loosened his grasp just long enough to tie the shirt around her head in a rough bandage, then pulled her close again.

Salima’s voice was muffled against his worn cotton t-shirt. “Where’s Mommy?”

It was if another explosion detonated inside his head, a burst of blinding, searing light that made his eyeballs ache.

Marta.

Merciful God, that was her bus.

He scooped up Salima and began to run, rushing the checkpoint in blind panic. Later, he realized that probably the only thing that kept the IDF soldiers from mowing him down right there was the fact that Salima, bloody and sobbing, was clasped against his chest. But as it was, they grabbed him, wrestling him to a stop.

“My wife is on that bus!” he shouted in Arabic, too frantic to think in Hebrew. “My wife! Dear God, my wife!”

Thankfully, one of the boys—for they were little more than boys, really, toy soldiers—understood him.

“Let him through,” the young man said to the others.

Their harsh grips became a rough shove forward. And he was through.

The carnage was hideous. He pulled the sleeve of his shirt across Salima’s eyes. She protested, but he ignored her. There was blood everywhere. And specks of pink, shiny stuff, anywhere from fingernail to fist-sized. He staggered forward, dodging a burning car and chunks of concrete. He spied a dismembered foot, still in its sock and shoe.

Bloody people were beginning to stagger away from the burning carcass of the bus, helped by other bloody people. He looked around, scanning faces beneath thick coatings of dust and blood. Marta. He had to find Marta. He and Salima needed her.

He saw a bloody purse.

An arm.

A pair of pants with the lower torso of a man in them.

They were objects. Odd things disconnected from their owners. Not people. Vaguely he registered that he must be going into shock. But who wouldn’t at the sight of this monstrosity? Belatedly, it occurred to him what the pink chunks were. Human flesh. Cooked until it lost its red, raw meat color.

And then he saw her.

She was lying on the ground. Her eyes were closed and one side of her face was black—charred-paper, black skin peeling away from the red flesh below—but it was his Marta. He pushed past the small crowd gathered around her. A Hasidic Jew with a broad-brimmed hat and long *payoth* sideburns crouched beside her, gazing down at the caved in place where the left half of her chest used to be.

“Dead,” the Jew announced emotionlessly. “Somebody cover up the corpse.”

She had a name. She *had a name*, god damn it! She was not a thing! She was a human being! A wife. A mother—God, a mother.

The diamond of rage within his breast exploded, sending agonizingly sharp shards coursing through his veins, cutting him from within until everything he knew, everything he was, bled out beneath his skin. And when the anguish had consumed him completely, the crystals of rage turned to ice and he froze inside. He became a white, Antarctic void.

He clutched his bleeding child to his breast while he stood over the body of his dead wife. And he could not cry. He could not cry.

After a long time, a single thought formed out of the blood and ice and rage.

I am Yusef Abahdi. I am the wrath of God.

A hot breath of air wafted across Ian McCloud's left cheek, carrying with it grit and a hint of death. The metal plate beside his face, almost too hot to touch, made his right cheek sweat. He eased his left hand forward, reaching up awkwardly from his prone position to dial in a minute windage adjustment to his tricked-out Barrett XM 500 sniper rifle's scope.

He scanned the street below, beige on beige, sand blowing across dirt, dust devils rising from shimmering waves of heat. Khartoum. Once a great city straddling the vast Nubian plains of the Sudan, now a certified armpit of the universe. Abandoned by the civilized world to wallow in its atrocities of violence and filth of body and soul. He looked out across the skyline, dirty brown in the morning sun—brown mud buildings that had long since lost their stucco, a few brown stunted trees coated with dust like skeletal ghosts. Brown people in streets brown with crusted clay. But beneath the brown surface lay a black hole of the human soul.

The broad street before him was a particularly grim little corner of Khartoum's worst slum, trampled by warring gangs, bled on and suffered on, ignored by the rest of the world. Except, of course, by El Noor. He was the new warlord in town and had his eye on capturing this worthless strip of real estate in a meaningless gesture of dominance over his neighbor.

Ian's soon to be brother-in-law, a double agent for the CIA and FSB—both agencies knew about it and used Alex as a conduit to pass information back and forth under the table—had passed along a message from the Russians that a possible terrorist plot might be cooking in this happy little corner of Purgatory. El Noor was rumored to be meeting with an up-and-coming Palestinian terrorist. The guess was that El Noor was planning to finance an attack of some kind. And Russian intel placed the target inside the United States.

Which was why Ian was parked on this roof doing surveillance, sweltering under a scrap wood shelter in hundred-degree heat with sweat pouring down his forehead and flies viciously biting the exposed backs of his hands. And it was barely eight o'clock in the morning. Welcome to K-town. *Jesus, what a hellhole.*

A loud rat-a-tat erupted nearby. *Gunfire.* He went utterly still, abruptly a predator on the hunt. Semi-automatic machine gun fire interspersed with single-shot rifle shots. Eight, maybe ten, weapons firing. Roughly two hundred yards to his left. He swung his rifle toward the noise, scanning methodically through his telescopic scope for its source. Armed men poured out of an ancient Land Rover, firing clumsily as they went. But the amount of lead they were laying down more than compensated for their lousy execution.

The street emptied as the locals melted into surrounding buildings. A motor revved and tires squealed. Closing in fast. From the other direction. *Hello.* He went on full battle alert as his position abruptly looked to be ground zero for some serious action. Another Jeep loaded with thugs careened around the corner. It screeched to a sideways stop, blocking the street.

Minions of Dharwani, this street's warlord, fired sporadically out of doorways and windows at the intruders. They couldn't match El Noor's AK-47's with their World War Two surplus M-1's. *One lopsided rout, coming up.*

Quick head count to his left...four, five, six. All wearing the distinctive black beret of Marak El Noor pulled down ominously over their right eyebrows. Four more El Noor gunmen plus a driver on the right. Late teens to early twenties. Ian mentally groaned. Put a gun in the hands of kids that age, and they abruptly had the brains of codfish.

Worse, they'd cut off his primary and secondary escape routes out of his hide. Plan C—admittedly shaky at best—involved exiting down the bombed-out street behind him, a den of drugs- and arms-dealers and killers-for-hire who'd gun down a white man as soon as talk to one. He'd better sit tight for now. He had good camouflage, the high ground, and he could shoot circles around any of the boys below. Not that he intended to get himself noticed in the first place. He was just the lousy observer, here, underpaid and overexposed, with orders only to watch and report.

Glass shattered in front of him. He eased his right eye to the rubber cup on the end of the scope. One of El Noor's boys was using his rifle butt to knock out the lone, remaining window in an otherwise boarded up storefront. The youth and two of his

compatriots leaped through the gap, disappearing inside the building.

El Noor's thugs dragged a guy out into the street. Three women garbed in traditional black robes called *abeyas* followed, wailing and screaming and pulling at the intruders' belts. A thug swatted the most aggressive woman—probably the wife—away like a gnat, backhanding her to the ground. Blood sprang from her mouth. She crawled back toward the building on her hands and knees, silent now.

Ian's gut clenched. He knew this drill. And it wasn't pretty. But he'd seen it often enough to have become numb to it. This place had that effect on a soul. It sucked the humanity out of a man and left only a hollow husk behind. No surprise that Khartoum was touted as the birthplace of practically all the world's most violent and vicious terrorists, Carlos the Jackal and Osama bin Laden heading up the hit parade of Khartoum's infamous scions.

Another Jeep pulled up. That alley behind him was starting to look distinctly better. Where were Dharwani's men? Surely, they would respond to this aggression. This was an outright declaration of turf war. For a moment, he got the sensation of watching swarms of insects fighting over the crumbs of a picnic. They didn't even look like human beings to him down there, with hopes and dreams and mothers somewhere who loved them. Damn, he was getting jaded. Next time Uncle Sam offered him a long rotation stateside, maybe he ought to consider taking the offer.

The remaining women's *abeyas* billowed in a gust of hot breeze as they retreated to the illusory safety of the building. The guy in the street was on his own. A spark of compassion poked at Ian's callous shell. It wasn't that they were cold-hearted bitches. It was just that they, too, knew the score. The man could die, or they *and* the man could die. He didn't blame them for choosing to live to see another day.

If he ever had kids, this kind of crap shouldn't exist in their world. And at the end of the day, that was why he was out here, hot and miserable, and watching this shit fest unfold through a rifle sight.

El Noor's thugs commenced beating the man, kicking and rifle whipping him. The victim fought back, but the thugs were quick, strong, and surprisingly efficient. The guy went down fast, staggering into one of his attackers and grabbing the El Noor man's shirt as he fell. A flash of white showed at the neck of the olive camouflage fabric, but then the attacker swung the butt of his rifle, landing a vicious blow to the side of the local man's skull.

Ian was startled. These dudes really knew their way around beating a guy to death. He'd never seen any of El Noor's thugs demonstrate this sort of cruel efficiency before. Had the warlord upgraded his cadre? Maybe invested in some freelance mercenaries to train his guys? The powers that be in Washington would be interested to hear about this little development.

Dull thuds of steel on flesh and the victim's screams drifted upward, pleas to a merciful God who clearly did not exist. The guy was probably dead by the fifth or sixth blow the way El Noor's super-thugs were going at him. But they continued swinging their rifles, beating the victim's dead body into hamburger to make their point to the locals peering out from behind their curtains at the extravaganza.

It was a demonstration of raw brutality Ian could do without. Faintly nauseous, he forced himself to sink into the cold detachment this line of work so often required of him. It was just a job. Someone had to do it, and as chance would have it, this moment had fallen to him. It wasn't personal. Just work. He never failed to be surprised, though, when no one intervened in one of these scenarios. *Welcome to hell.*

Rather than watch any more arcs of blood sail through the air and land in modern art splats on the dusty street, he ranged his scope up and down the city block, then across the opposite rooflines. A glint of...something...caught his eye. He zeroed in on the metallic flash where no such thing should be, positioned on a rooftop near the left end of the street. His right thumb depressed the gun sight's zoom button and the pinpoint flash of light raced toward his eye, growing exponentially in size. It came into focus.

Shit.

Two round black circles pointed at him, large over small, scope over barrel.

Another sniper!

And the weapon—a Sig 550 modified sniper rig with what looked like a Kahles telescopic sight—was pointed directly back at him. For a shocked instant, Ian's one-eyed gaze locked with that of the other sniper, scope to scope.

Piper Roth dived for the flat roof below the raised lip of the storefront serving as a shield. *Holy crap!* Breathing heavily, she lay there, rough asphalt shingles burning her cheek. *Who was that?* Why hadn't the other sniper shot her? Cautiously easing upward, she pressed an eye against her scope once more. The other shooter was gone.

Damn, damn, damn.

Grabbing the rifle, tripod and all, and slinging it over a shoulder, she leaped for the back of the roof. Crouched low. Dodged around a rusty rain cistern and slammed the rappelling clip, pre-tied to an escape rope, which was pre-tied to a leg of the cistern, onto a belt loop. A running jump off the roof, one-hundred-eighty-degree twist in mid-air to catch herself against the wall with her feet, jarring herself from foot to hip. She absorbed the blow, pushing up and away from the wall in a giant, leap-

frogging descent.

Her feet hit the ground. Thank God. A stumble, and she ripped the clip free. *The rope*. No time to retrieve it. No biggie. This observation post was blown anyway. Who *was* that guy?

Time for the rest of her emergency egress plan. Down to the end of the alley. A quick look out into the street, a block over from the action. Fortunately, the boulevard was deserted, compliments of the shots fired a few minutes ago. She took off running.

At the next corner, she slowed, breathing heavily, and peered around the bullet chipped corner of a building into the crossing street. A flash of movement disappeared behind a building, moving away from the scene of the beating. Could be a local fleeing for cover. *Could be the other sniper*.

Paralleling the guy's path, she eased around the corner, hugging the dusty slivers of shadow for what scant cover they could provide. She glided forward slowly now. The sun was oppressive, blistering the street cruelly. All was as still as an old western town, moments before a shootout between gunslingers. Not even a puff of air passed through to stir a bit of dust. Hopefully, this game of cat-and-mouse wouldn't come to that.

No help for it. What safety there was lay on the other side of the street. She started across the broad boulevard, sauntering without an apparent care in the world. People in this place smelled fear like they smelled supper cooking and responded to both like ravenous dogs. She was dressed as a man and needed to move like one. If her cover were blown and she was found out for a woman—she didn't even want to think about what would happen to her.

She made the far curb and let out the breath she'd been holding. A narrow alley loomed between an occupied building and the shot up shell of what used to be a grocery store. She took off in a short sprint to the other end.

Another street. Another slow saunter across its Grand Canyon width, and another mad dash down a fetid alley—this one an informal trash dump for the area. Up and over a pile of foul refuse—plastic bags, chunks of concrete, and the contents of chamber pots.

The third crossing street yielded a glimpse of a running figure. Angling toward her. *Dammit*. She broke into yet another sprint and spurted several blocks forward. Paused. Looked left. Right. No alleys nearby. Just a shelled out apartment building, five stories high. It was a maze of partial walls and sudden openings. Not great, but better than nothing. She ducked inside the ruin.

Ian stopped in the middle of the street, looking around urgently. Where in hell had the other sniper gone? He'd completely evaporated. The guy had been standing right here, hesitating, and then he'd just disappeared.

He *had* to find the other sniper. It was his job to know *everyone* who walked these streets. Not to mention his life might depend on knowing all the players. Who else had a man in the area, and why had he been sent? Another government? A private operator? Was the other sniper only here to observe? Or was his purpose more direct? More sinister? Some of the baddest motherfuckers on the planet scrapped and fought—and sold their services—on these streets. Men who made Carlos and Osama look like Girl Scouts.

Nobody came to Khartoum for the weather.

The hull of a dead apartment building loomed before him. He picked his way over the ground floor of the building's crumbling concrete remains, its steel bones exposed and twisted. No self-respecting sniper would trap himself on the top floors of a layout like this. He frowned. Unless there another way down from the upper floors besides the wrecked central staircase he'd just spotted...

Too many questions rattling around his head. Not enough answers. He eased up the pocked concrete stairs, poked his head up cautiously, and glanced around the hollow shell of the second floor. It was too quiet up here. Too still. On a hunch, he descended the stairs he'd just climbed, as quiet as a panther. He raced across the littered, graffitied ground floor toward the back of the building. He was taking a gamble by giving up the front exit. It left an escape route for the other sniper.

He emerged behind the building and spied the remains of an iron fire escape dangling precariously from a few rusty bolts in the back wall. He sure as hell wouldn't want to try it. He estimated the thing wouldn't take more than a couple hundred pounds max. And with the other sniper toting around a heavy rifle and gear, that didn't leave a hell of a lot of body weight to spare.

On fast, silent feet, he moved away from the building, far enough to have an unobstructed view of the fire escape. He crouched behind a rubble pile, carefully shifting a couple basketball-sized chunks of concrete to make a hole to peer through. Deep silence settled over the place. If the other sniper decided to head for the front exit, maybe he'd get lucky and hear the guy.

Ian waited.

And waited.

He thought he heard a noise near the top of the fire escape, but he saw nothing. This mouse was patient. But not nearly patient enough. Ian had been known to wait a week in the same exact spot for the perfect shot to materialize.

The mouse got antsy after twenty more minutes. *Amateur.*

He watched in minor disbelief as his quarry swung lightly out onto the fire escape, half-crawling, half-shimmying down its ruined iron length. The guy was a hellatious climber, lithe and smooth, swinging from rung to rung like a gymnast. The rifle across the sniper's back clanged into a handrail and the guy froze. Weighing options, no doubt. The sniper opted for speed over stealth. Ian watched, impressed, as he flung himself downward, taking three and four steps at a time. The stair trembled under the onslaught, its bolts squealing as it threatened to break free, but the sniper raced on grimly.

Ian chose his moment and pounced just before the guy hit the dirt. The other sniper's shirt slipped through his hands as the guy lurched and vaulted the stair rail, sailing through the air, landing lightly on deeply bent knees. He was unlucky and his feet shot out from under him on the loose debris, but the sniper rolled and sprang back to his feet in one athletic motion.

Ian dived for the guy's legs and was stunned to miss as his quarry's jungle boots slipped through his grasp. *Man, that guy was fast.* He grunted as he hit the ground and was forced to roll to his feet himself. The other sniper was getting away! He shoved upright, ignoring his stinging palms, and gave chase.

Although the mouse was quick, Ian was stronger. As the sniper scurried through the streets of the Khartoum neighborhood, Ian gradually gained on him until he was so close he heard the mouse's labored breathing, rasping fearfully. The guy rounded a corner and slipped, almost losing his feet. Ian put on an extra burst of speed and launched himself forward. His arms wrapped around the other sniper's waist, his momentum carrying them both crashing to the ground in a tangle of limbs and rifles and nylon straps.

He knew the second he landed on top of his quarry.

The other guy was *not* a guy.

What the hell?

The sniper, a *woman* for Christ's sake, thrashed beneath him, jabbing for his eyes and throat, her knee wrenching up toward his groin.

"Let...me...go," she ground out in American-accented English between gritted teeth as she struggled.

"Not on your life," he grunted back, straining to force her wrists away from his face. They grappled in fierce silence. Inch by hard earned inch, he won the day, his superior strength overtaking this woman's steely determination. Vivid blue eyes glared up at him from a tanned strip of face covered in dirt. She yielded all of a sudden, the fight draining out of her so fast he accidentally slammed the back of her hand to the ground.

"Watch it. That's my shooting hand," she snapped.

"Who the hell *are* you, lady? And who do you work for?"

Piper glared up at the other sniper, furious at herself for letting him catch her. She should've been faster. Smarter. Should've known the city better before she went up on a roof to observe the action below. Much more coolly than she felt, she replied, "Perhaps we should get out of sight before we have this conversation?"

He shrugged. He was garbed like a native and had a dark enough tan to pass for one. She, on the other hand, was not the deep bronze of the man in front of her, and only thinly veiled as a man in her pants, boots, and hat to hide her long, feminine hair. She had a hell of a lot more at stake out here than he did.

She added, "With El Noor breaking the truce, death squads from both camps will be roaming the streets shortly."

Another shrug from the guy sprawled all too suggestively on top of her. *Bastard.*

As the silence stretched out, she finally snapped, "Get off me."

"Give me your word you won't try to run."

"Not from you, I won't," she retorted scornfully.

Grinning, he pushed up and back, gaining his feet and swinging his oversized sniper rifle into a firing position at his hip all in one move.

"What're you gonna do? Blow my guts out with that thing?" she grumbled as she climbed painfully to her feet.

"Think of it as insurance against having to run around like a maniac any more in this heat."

She rolled her eyes, glaring. "Your place or mine?"

His mouth twitched with humor. "Where's your hidey hole?"

"Back by where that guy got beat to death."

"Dharwani's men are probably swarming all over there by now. My place then," the guy answered.

"Lead the way."

He snorted. "You first. Head for that building over there." He lifted his chin, indicating where to go.

So much for making a break for it. At least he sounded American. They were marginally playing for the same team, then.

He looked American. Back in the States, she would say he looked like a California surfer with that deep tan of his. If she was lucky, he had the always-be-nice-to-girls mentality of an American, too.

Scowling, she picked up her rifle and slung its strap over her shoulder. Following his directions, she clambered across a combination dump and graveyard behind an apartment building. Such was the breakdown of humanity in this place that the dead hardly got civilized burials. She'd only been here a few days and the place was so depressing she was started to be affected by it, herself.

Her captor directed her down several blocks' worth of back alleys and narrow side streets to an innocuous two-story, thick walled, mud building.

"Stop here," he ordered as she approached a door leading into the building from the alley.

This was his hideout, huh? Not bad. It was close to the action but sitting in the no-man's land between warring factions.

He reached around her with his left hand to insert a key in the door's modern, double-action deadbolt lock. He kept his right hand on the trigger of his rifle and his eyes on her the whole time, though, giving her no opening. Cautious SOB.

Of course, if their positions had been reversed, she would've been no less cautious. She peered into the black maw beyond the door and couldn't make out a thing.

"Up the stairs," he bit out.

She was getting good and sick of that drill sergeant tone of voice of his, but he had a big damned gun pointed at her. She heard him locking the outside door behind them and accelerated, racing up the concrete stairs, forcing him to sprint up the stairs behind her.

A small landing at the top held only another locked door. She stopped just short of it. He joined her, breathing easily—*show off*—and she said dryly, "I assume you'll go first so I don't set off your booby traps?"

He took hold of her right arm above her elbow. She jerked it away, but he was ready and maintained his grip. He snapped, "Chill out. If I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead."

"I could say the same for you," she retorted. "I had the shot first." Not by much, but by enough. She'd just swung her rifle toward the odd movement on a nearby roof, just zoomed in her telescopic sight, just frozen in shock at the sight of another sniper when he'd swung his weapon her way and stared back at her. It was the nastiest surprise she'd had in a very long time.

He shoved her through the door and swung her around, pushing her up against the wall in one hard, fast move. He leaned in close and snarled, "I don't appreciate having sniper rigs pointed at me a whole hell of a lot, lady."

She glared back at him as he loomed over her. "And I don't appreciate being chased all over a damned war zone. You forced me to expose myself a hell of a lot more than I wanted to."

"You ran away."

"You chased me."

"What's your name?" he demanded. "Who do you work for?" His hazel eyes blazed like arc welding torches, so hot they incinerated her from the inside out.

"Who says I work for anybody?" she purred.

"Don't bullshit me."

"Who do *you* work for?" she retorted.

"Can't you guess?" he growled, stepping even closer to her.

"In this town, you could be working for anyone. You're just a hired gun," she accused. A big, hot, sexy hired gun.

His voice dropped in pitch and timbre, sliding across her skin like velvet sandpaper. "Is that what you are?"

She stared up at him, and he stared back at her. It became a silent contest of wills, and the tension stretched tighter and tighter between them.

All at once, it broke.

He surged forward, plastering his mouth against hers as she all but assaulted him back, wrapping her arms around his neck and a lustful leg around his hips. His hands grabbed her ass and lifted her against him. He slammed her back against the wall, and she moaned greedily.

She grabbed a handful of his sun-bleached hair and pulled on it, forcing his head back so she could kiss his neck. The salty sweat-and-man taste was sharp and savory on her tongue, and she devoured it hungrily.

Death had come calling this morning, and they'd both cheated it. They were alive. Blood coursed hotly through her veins, laced with so much adrenaline she felt like she could fly.

"What's your name?" he ground out. For emphasis, his tongue swirled inside her ear and made her leg, the one supporting her weight, nearly buckle.

"Piper," she gasped.

"You're so damned hot, Piper."

Said the pot to the kettle. She gasped as he wrapped his arm around her waist and lifted her entire eight with ease. He spun away from the wall and sat her on the edge of his dining table. She flung open her knees as he surged between them, his hands moving restlessly across her back while his mouth roamed across her face, neck, and shoulders.

She could just eat him alive. "Tell me your name," she gasped.

"No."

Bastard. Her nylon ammo vest fell away beneath his nimble fingers.

His shoulder holster dropped away beneath her hands.

Her thigh knife and its garter-sheath hit the ground as he stroked his hand from her hip down her thigh.

Her hands slid down acres of man-chest to his waist, and she fumbled at the buckle she found there. His ammo belt thudded to the floor. “Your name,” she panted.

“No,” he ground out. Her bandolier of shells and flares slid off her shoulder and thunked onto the table behind her.

Taking her with him, he spun away, knocking over a chair in his haste. She oomphed as he backed her into the refrigerator, then returned the favor by spinning him against the wall. A picture frame hit the floor and broke as he yanked her up against him.

She lifted the throwing knife out of the neck sheath behind his head and let it fall to the floor as her insides melted and her body molded to his. She wanted him inside her so bad she could hardly think.

Pocketknives, wrist knives, spare ammo clips, and spotter’s scopes clattered down around them.

They peeled each other’s long-sleeved camouflage shirts off, and he tall but tore her tank top off, shoving it over her head. In return, she shoved her hands underneath his t-shirt.

Lord, his skin was hot to the touch. His abs—holy God. They were slick with a sheen of perspiration, rippling with muscle, and hard as oak. She leaned forward to inhale the musky scent of his deodorant, exploring the male wonderland of his torso with her mouth and hands.

She yanked down his pants zipper, eliciting a groan from him. “Tell me your name,” she demanded yet again.

“Ahh, God, no,” he groaned as her fingers went exploring.

Frustrated at his refusal to give her a name, she staggered a step back from him. Who was she kidding? She was going to have hot monkey sex with him right here, right now, even if she didn’t know his damned name.

They hopped around awkwardly together for a minute like one-legged kangaroos, yanking off their pants and boots, finally managing to discard them. Then he swept her up in his arms and carried her swiftly into the bedroom.

He followed her down to the mattress and she reveled in his weight crushing her. He was as urgent and driven as she was, all restless energy and surging lust as his hands and mouth, teeth and tongue roved across her body hungrily. They rolled and struggled like a pair of wrestlers, testing each other’s power and flexibility in another contest of wills. Eventually, his superior strength began to prevail once more.

Normally, she hated being overpowered by any man. But today, it turned her on like crazy.

He braced himself over her, but she gripped his biceps forcefully and ground out, “No.”

Disbelief blossomed in his stare.

“Tell. Me. Your. Name,” she bit out from behind clenched teeth. It was one of the hardest things she’d ever done: stopping herself from grabbing him and going for it.

“Ian,” he finally groaned.

She drove upward, and his entire body uncoiled as he met her, driving downward and pinning her to the mattress with his glorious size and strength.

“Yes, Ian. Yes. Like that,” she panted. “More.”

Pillows went sailing. She clenched the brass spindles in the headboard and his fists closed over hers, gripping tightly, making her his willing captive. He stared down into her eyes and she stared back, holding him in her thrall as surely as he held her in his.

Pressure built to epic proportions inside her and she fought to hold it back. To let it build until its explosion tore her completely apart. And Ian, damn him, did the same. His jaw muscles rippled as he clenched his teeth, visibly fighting against the explosion building inside him.

Quickly, it turned into a contest to see who could last the longest without having a gigantic, soul-destroying orgasm...while at the same time pushing the other person over the edge.

The amusement in his stare faded into determination, and from determination into gluttonous pleasure, and from gluttonous pleasure into mindless delirium. She knew the feeling. Words failed her, and she heard herself panting his name over and over in a bad parody of a porn flick.

She fought to the last inch of her being, but without warning the dam gave way utterly and completely, crashing in on her and deluging her with waves of pleasure so powerful that she was flattened beneath the weight and power of them. The good news was that Ian shouted and let go at nearly the exact same instant.

She collapsed back against the soft cotton sheets while he supported his upper body with his elbows on either side of her head.

“You killed me,” he finally mumbled.

Ditto. Aloud, she managed to breathe, “Wow.”

Gradually she caught her breath, and the heaving of his chest slowed against hers. His heartbeat, frantic against her breast, slowed as well.

With the return of oxygen to her brain came a sudden and alarming burst of sanity. She'd just fallen in the sack and had the hottest sex of her life with a total stranger. She'd had to ask him his name mere seconds before the actual act.

"I won," she declared.

"Did not. You *so* came first," he retorted.

Hah. So it *had* been a contest. "Yeah, but I had the best orgasm," she replied.

He grinned down at her. "You go ahead and think that if it makes you feel better, honey."

Eyes narrowing, she purred, "Yes, but I'm ready to go again. Right now."

He threw his head back and laughed richly. It was an infectious sound and her lips couldn't help curving up in an answering smile. Until she felt his flesh stirring inside her, though. Her smile faded and she stared up at him in shocked anticipation. Soon, a new erection filled her and he began stroking her lazily into oblivion once more.

"Before I lose the ability to form sentences," she murmured, "how are we going to define a win, here?"

He studied her thoughtfully.

"Most orgasms? She suggested hopefully.

"Oh, no. You're not stacking the deck on me like that. Loser's the first person who can't stand and walk across the room."

Oh, my. She hoped she lost.

It took a couple of hours, but she was officially declared the loser when Ian managed to roll out of bed with a groan and shamle into the other room to fetch them bottles of water. The ceiling fan turned lazily overhead, sending sultry air wafting across her flushed skin. It was going to be a month before she could summon the strength to walk again.

He came back and sat down on the edge of the bed, gloriously naked. He was possibly more intimidating without clothes than he was fully decked out in warrior's gear. Like this, she could see all the layers of rock-hard muscle, the collection of scars that spoke of winning more fights than he'd lost, and the overall toughness of the man beneath the fancy military gear.

His physique was a sharp reminder that she was *not* as well equipped physically as a man to be out here on the edge of Hell all by herself. Of course, she would like to think she compensated for that by being smarter than most of the men gathered in a hellhole like this.

Holding a wad of the top sheet to her chest, she sat up and finally took a good look around his place. It was decorated as hedonistically as any seraglio. Colorful and complicated Turkish rugs covered the floors, and elaborately carved wooden furniture adorned the corners. Low bed surrounded by white gauze curtains, currently pulled back, pile of silk pillows, a tall, brass hookah pipe--it looked like a set straight out of a 1930's sheikh movie.

"You decorate this place?" she murmured.

He glanced around and snorted. "Not my taste. It came like this. The deal is I keep it from getting looted, and the owner doesn't tell anyone I'm here."

Abundant mirrors gave both the bedroom and living area a sense of open space...and reflected her disheveled image from a half-dozen different angles. Her lips looked rosy and swollen and her hair was a wavy mess around her face.

Beyond a doorway obscured with long strings of beads, her gaze lighted on a porcelain toilet and a claw foot bathtub. She threw him a sour glance. "And to think, I'm living in a one-room dump with no running water, an Army cot, and a chamber pot."

He grinned. "With the sewers destroyed, I have to pay a boy to clean out the septic tank from time to time. But I repaired the rain cistern on the roof. I have running water." He added slyly, "Late in the afternoon when the sun has heated it, I can take a hot bath."

"Now you're just showing off."

As he stepped into camo pants, he asked over his shoulder, "Hungry?"

"Thirsty," she replied.

He disappeared into the other room and she hunted around until she found her panties wadded on the floor beside a fancy antique armoire. Her bra had landed on the back of an armchair in the far corner. She shimmied into both and then scrambled into her pants and tank top.

Embarrassment overcame her at having just fallen into bed with a man she barely knew. Even if he had just done the exact same crazy thing. Blushing furiously, she stepped into the living room.

Ian tossed her a bottle of water from over by the kitchenette. She caught it neatly with one hand and proceeded to down it. She tossed the empty bottle back at him. Unfortunately, he turned and snagged it before it could bean him in the back of the head. Good reflexes.

He said dryly, "We got a little sidetracked before, but we do need to talk."

Sidetracked? She would call the last few hours an epic detour.

This was not a conversation she was looking forward to. But he was without question stronger than she was—she knew that from first-hand experience—and he could force her to stay here, and to talk for that matter, if he wanted to.

She scowled while he put a bunch of grapes, dates, and crackers on a plate and sliced open a pomegranate. He paused on

his way over to a low, Occidental-style table—not the one she’d sat on not too long ago while they tried to give each other tonsillectomies with their tongues, thankfully—and pulled the long chain dangling from a ceiling fan. It began rotating lazily.

The air wafting down from it was warm, but the light breeze against her skin was welcome, nonetheless.

He put the plate on the table, sank down onto a cushion beside it, picked up a date, and bit into it. “Are you going to join me, or are you just going to stand there and stare?”

Her scowled deepened as she plunked down on a cushion across the table from him. “Who are you?”

He grinned. “Funny, but I was about to ask you the exact same thing.”

“You first,” she snapped.

“No, you,” he snapped back.

“No, *you*,” she retorted, “I asked first.”

“I caught you, and I’m feeding you.” He added archly, “And I did win our contest.”

Jerk. She glared but answered, “My name’s Piper Roth. You?”

“Ian McCloud.”

“Who do you work for?” she demanded.

“Ah, ah, ah. I caught you, remember? Who do *you* work for?”

She nibbled a cracker. Sipped more water. Glanced up at him as if she’d forgotten the question. He shifted a foot so his knee stuck up and propped his elbow on it. And waited. Studying her with disconcerting intensity. God, she could get lost in those piercing green-on-brown eyes of his.

Work, Piper. Focus. He wasn’t going to buy her cover story for a minute, but she might as well throw it out there. She replied, “I’m an aid worker. I’m here to give kids vaccinations and vitamin shots. Teach women proper nutrition for their kids.”

“While toting around a sniper rifle?” He snorted. “Who signs your paycheck?”

“Who says I’m collecting a paycheck?”

He rolled his eyes. “*Nobody* comes to this place for random shits and grins. You’re on a job. Aid worker, huh? That’s a pretty thin cover for a woman in this part of the world.”

He would not be wrong. She shrugged in response and replied, “Who are you working for?”

“I’m U.S. military.”

Translation: military intelligence, or maybe straight up Defense Intelligence Agency. Or he could be part of a Special Ops Team. “Where’s the rest of your unit?” she asked.

“I’m a one-man show.”

“No way. Nobody’s dumb enough to come to this place without back-up.”

“Where’s your back-up, then?” he challenged.

She huffed. “I don’t need back-up to give kids vitamins and vaccines.”

“Your employer sent you to the most dangerous corner of the globe with that crappy a cover? Are they *trying* to kill you?”

Frankly, she’d said pretty much the same thing to her boss before she left on this assignment. But the intel she was chasing down had been hot, and time had been short.

She’d been tracking an American separatist group calling itself the Patrick Henry Patriots—PHP, for short—for longer than she cared to think about. Over a year, now.

When one of their members had popped up on a government computer as having bought a ticket to Khartoum, Sudan, it had set off alarm bells galore in various government agencies. Seeing as she was the only full-time operative tracking PHP who would recognize most or all of its members on sight, she was by far the most qualified person to be over here finding out what a bunch of bubbas from Idaho were doing in a place like this. Of course, not only did she knew all of the group’s members on sight, but she also knew their MO’s.

Which was why she was confused as hell by this junket into North Africa’s hottest hotbed of terrorist activity. The Patrick Henry Patriots were all about American patriotism. They despised foreigners of all stripes and believed the white, American male—armed with a shotgun, pick-up truck, and a case of beer—was the rightful ruler of the entire planet.

Ian startled her out of her musings by declaring forcefully, “Your boss is an asshole for sending you here. Quit this job and go home. Now.”

She shrugged. “I like the job.”

“Why?” He looked like the question had fallen out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“Giving poor kids from a rotten place a better shot at surviving is good work. Satisfying.”

He shot her a skeptical look over her insistence on sticking with her lame cover, so she switched subjects. “Why are you here, Ian McCloud?”

“Mom and apple pie?”

It was her turn to snort. The PHP guys really felt that way. But this man was in another class of warrior altogether. He was the real deal. “Try again,” she retorted.

"I like to kill shit and blow stuff up," he threw out.

That sounded more accurate. "Be that as it may, why are you *here*? It looked to me like you're acting purely as an observer. What are your marching orders? No wait, let me guess. Don't interfere. Just watch. Don't let anyone know you're here."

He didn't bother to deny the truth of her guess and merely challenged, "What are *your* orders?"

It was her turn to shrug. "Vaccinate as many kids as I can...and don't die." *And find out who the PHP guys are here to meet and why.*

Thinking back to where his rooftop observation post had been, she probed a little more. "Are you here to watch El Noor? You were pointed at the edge of his sector—why is the U.S. government interested in a small-time, local warlord like him?"

"Local today. International tomorrow."

So. Military intelligence thought El Noor was looking to expand his operations, huh? Interesting. But not germane to her investigation of a bunch of American separatist nutballs. "Good luck with that, G.I. Joe."

He grunted. "Good luck to you, too. You're gonna need it, honey."

She lunged across the low table and grabbed him by the throat with both hands before he even blinked. Fruit and plates went flying, clattering onto the tile floor. "Important safety tip, Tonto. Don't call me honey."

McCloud surged to his feet, meeting her threatening move with one of his own. His hands, bladed like knives, struck the insides of her wrists sharply enough to send her hands flying away from his neck. He grabbed fistfuls of her shirt and hauled her up against his big body, glaring down at her from a range of about twelve inches, one-hundred-percent a killer. And pissed.

Piper froze, appalled that she'd just assaulted a trained killer. It had been pure reflex. Her father always had called her honey, and just hearing the word made her react violently.

Very carefully, she used her palms to pet his chest soothingly. *Nice tiger. Good kitty.*

The warm bulge of his pecs registered under her fingertips and her breath hitched at the raw masculine appeal of the man. She lifted her hands away carefully and stepped back, breathing altogether too quickly for her peace of mind.

"Why didn't you break my wrists for that?" she asked in a small voice.

He murmured, his voice low and charged, "You know I can break them, right?"

"Yes," she replied warily.

"Then there's no need to prove it, is there?"

A tiny, unwilling smile of flitted across her face while shock roiled through her gut that she'd escaped that giant mistake unscathed. Her father would never have let her off the hook like that. "You're a cool customer."

He shrugged, his mesmerizing stare never breaking contact with hers.

Okay, so maybe cool wasn't the right adjective for him. Icy came closer. She took another step back, seeking escape from his overpowering magnetism. But he followed her, stalking her until she bumped into a wall at her back.

He planted his hand son the wall on either side of her head. Her hands itched to touch him again. To rub all over those glorious muscles. To grab his ass. Pull him closer for another round of—

She swore mentally.

He leaned in closer, abruptly dead serious. "Here's the deal. I'm not going to turn you over to El Noor. I think you're working for an American agency of some kind. Which puts us on the same side out here. So give me a straight answer. What could possibly have persuaded a young, attractive woman like you to come play in Hell?"

His husky voice slid across her skin like whisky, smooth but with a sexy bite. "Is that where we are? Hell?" She gazed around his place over his shoulder. "This isn't so bad after all. I pictured a more brimstone-and-torment decor."

He grunted with scant humor. "I give you two weeks in Khartoum to change your mind. This place'll make a cynic out of even a Pollyanna like you."

"I'm no Pollyanna."

"I'd say you're damned optimistic to think you can come here alone and walk out alive."

She glared at him indignantly, and he smirked back. His head bent down until their lips were about three inches apart. Close enough to taste the sweetness of dates on his breath. To remember all the unrestrained lust from before. To crave more of it.

He muttered, "Why are you here, Piper?"

"I already told you. Why won't you believe me?"

"Because I can smell a lie at twenty paces."

"Oh yeah? What do I smell like?" she asked breathlessly. Her entire body felt electrified. Energized.

"Cinnamon," he murmured. "And peaches. Spicy and warm. Like slow sex in the summertime."

Oh. My. God.

"You can trust me," he murmured, his words a caress against her lips. Another inch or two and they'd be kissing each other's lights out. Sucking tonsils and tearing off clothes and going at each other like horny beasts. Again. It would be *epic*.

She struggled to recall what he'd just said. Oh, right. Trust. "It's not about trust. It's about what I am and am not allowed to talk about."

His head lifted enough for his sharply intelligent gaze read her eyes astutely. “Allowed, huh?” he breathed. “Nuff said.”

Dammit. She’d revealed more than she’d wanted to. Using the word, ‘allowed’ implied a boss. Classified information. An agency whose name could be reduced to several alphabet letters.

He stepped back abruptly, leaving her feeling cold and deprived. Goosebumps covered both of her forearms. Whoa, the effect that man had on her was unnerving.

He shrugged casually as if she hadn’t had the slightest effect on him. “Maybe you will make it a full month out here, then. Hard to tell. You were reasonably agile on that staircase where I tackled you.”

Memory of his hard body slamming into hers, pressing her against the ground flashed through her mind. Crap, this guy did weird things to her head. “Gee, thanks. Was that actually a compliment from you?”

“Nah. If I wanted to compliment you I’d tell you that, cleaned up, girlied up, and out of those combat boots, you might not look half-bad.”

She scooped up her sniper rig and slung the nylon strap over her shoulder. “Go to hell, McCloud.”

He chuckled and raised his water bottle to her in a mock toast. “Already there, darlin’.”

Eyes narrowed, she said tightly, “Thanks for the diversion, but it’s time for me to get back to work.”

“I’ll walk you back to your place.”

“I don’t need a chaperone.”

“Yeah,” he said flatly, “you do. Particularly since you’re wearing western garb.”

“I’ll put my hair up back under my hat and on one will know I’m a girl. I *am* wearing combat boots, after all.”

He snorted. “One look at that tush, and *nobody* will mistake you for a guy.”

She glared at him and he glared back.

She took satisfaction from the fact that he was first to speak. “This is a Muslim town, *chica*. An extremely conservative one. Unescorted women are asking for trouble. As much as I’d enjoy laughing at your funeral, my John Wayne genes won’t let me send you out there alone.”

“Neanderthal,” she muttered.

“Feminist bitch,” he muttered back.

Glaring at each other, he opened the door for her and she stepped past him onto the landing outside. Even brushing by him without touching him made her pulse accelerate alarmingly, damn him. Ian McCloud was trouble with a capital T.

He did walk her home, and she didn’t know how she felt about that. But she definitely felt *something*.

As the sun set, Ian looked around his rooftop perch. All set for the night to come. Should be quite a show. There was nothing quite like sitting smack dab in the middle of a war zone to get the adrenaline pumping. He, not for the first time, doubted that Uncle Sam was paying him enough to hang his ass out to dry like this.

Latest intel reports from higher headquarters said rumors were rumbling about some sort of coordinated attack against the United States, originating somewhere in North Africa. Which was interesting. The western intel spotlight was shining so brightly on the Middle East right now that a camel couldn't take a dump without someone in D.C. knowing about it. An attack generated from a less closely watched place like Sudan spoke of a sophistication and understanding of western methods that was, frankly, alarming.

Where was Piper right now? He hadn't seen her for a week, and God knew, he'd kept an eye peeled for her ever since their epic encounter at his place. He still dreamed of her every night. Hot, sweaty, wake up with the mother of all hard-ons dreams.

But since that one time when their ships had crossed in the night—or more accurately, collided in the blinding light of day—she must have been laying low. Way low. Or maybe she'd actually taken his advice and gone home—

--Nah. She was too stubborn for that.

As for him, he could only explain away their hook-up as a bout of temporary insanity. His life had no room for a woman in it, let alone a relationship.

Sure, he thought about life after the military, sometimes. Finding a nice hypothetical woman, settling down, and having some rug rats. But he didn't get distracted in the middle of a dangerous as hell op in the one of most deadly corners of the planet.

At least, not until Piper Roth had looked at him through a sniper's scope.

Was she still out there in the city, somewhere? Hopefully she was done for the day, tucked safely in her hidey hole. Except knowing her, she was out here somewhere, too damned close to the action for her own good. He'd sent an e-mail back to Navy Intel asking who she was but had never gotten an answer. Which was a partial answer in and of itself. His guess was CIA.

Although, she was hotter than any CIA agent he'd ever met. That crowd tended to go for low-key, understated looking people. The kind who could slide under the radar without attracting attention. But not Piper. She looked like a television version of a spy with that sleek body, fashion model face, and come-hither sex appeal.

God knew, she'd blown his mind. It wasn't that he hadn't had his fair share of hot chicks. All he had to do was go to a known Special Forces bar and the groupie babes lined up, panting to have sex with a real, live SF operator.

Of course, Piper Roth wasn't just a CIA anomaly. She was a complete anomaly in the entire male bastion of Special Forces operations. How the locals hadn't already made her for a woman was beyond him.

He wished her luck remaining anonymous. And he wished her back into his bed. Fiercely. Desperately. But he would have to actually know where to find her to be able to hook up with her again.

He'd promised himself he would stay away from her and the danger she posed. But he'd broken down after two days and two sleepless nights and gone to the hidey hole he'd walked her back to that first day. She had either taken him to a decoy location or she'd packed up and moved on. Either way, she'd disappeared from the radar in Khartoum.

What was her story, anyway? Where did a hot number like her learn to shoot like a sniper? What drew a woman to this sort of danger? His baby sister, Katie, had insisted on getting involved with a dangerous man and his even more dangerous life, but the whole McCloud clan was soldiers and adventurers. Katie was bound to absorb some of the adrenaline junkie tendencies of her family. What was Piper's deal?

As the sun completed its blood red descent in the west, the day's last dust devils wound down. He propped his binoculars on the edge of the roof and waited for the latest horror to unfold. It didn't take long for the show to start.

The first act unfolded innocently enough. A pair of black-robed, veiled women hurried home with plastic bags of groceries. It was nearly time for evening prayers, and a car with markings of the religious police turned onto the boulevard, cruising slowly.

The vehicle stopped abruptly beside the women. A man jumped out. Started screaming. Ian couldn't hear all of it, but it sounded like some sort of tirade about showing too much flesh.

Huh? Both women were in full black moving object mode. Voluminous robes, head scarves and face veils swathed both women. Apparently, however, the taller one's robes were too short and too much of her ankles was exposed.

Ian snorted at the cop's hysteria. Must be some set of ankles. *Asshole.*

The religious cop whipped out a cane and took a vicious whack across the back of the knees of the tall woman. Her legs collapsed out from under her, and she cried out. The thug hit her several more times while the other woman flinched away in terror. The rattan cane bent like rubber under the force of the guy's blows, emitting an ominous, buzzing whine as it whipped through the air.

Damn, he's hitting that woman hard. He'll kill her if he hits the wrong spot.

A new player entered Ian's circular field of view. A running figure dressed in black slacks, black turtleneck, slouchy hat, and a black flak vest made a flying tackle that sent the cop to the ground. A second religious policeman piled out of the car aggressively.

Here we go.

This was just the sort of incident that could blow up into a mob scene. He adjusted the binoculars to a wider field of view. The first cop and the mercenary who'd tackled him engaged in a short, grossly one-sided fight. Seconds later, the unidentified foreigner stood over the cop, who writhed on the ground in pain. Ian got his first good look at the unidentified attacker.

Shit.

He knew that profile. He'd watched it over fruit and crackers at his table. Watched it writhe in his bed in the throes of pleasure. Piper. What in bloody hell was she doing?

The second cop took a swing at Piper's back with his cane, but her reflexes were superb and she ducked under the blow, spinning and coming up with a sharp jab to the guy's gut.

Piper started yelling in Arabic. *Holy Christ. She was berating the religious cops.*

Nonononono. Not good. *Shut your mouth, chica.* But no matter how hard he mentally exhorted her to stop, she continued. In fact, she gathered steam as she got in the cop's face. And her voice started to rise in pitch toward shrill.

Fuck. In a second, everybody within earshot would figure out she was a woman beneath that soldier's garb. Then they'd all turn on her.

Please, honey. Shut the hell up!

When backup for the cops arrived, the authorities were going to beat the living shit out of her. And when they made her scream, all doubt that she was a woman would be erased. Then she was fucking done for.

The Sudanese residents sure as hell weren't going to help her. Nobody messed with the religious police. The locals might be happy to slaughter each other like sheep, but they were all good Muslims when the religious police were around.

Damn, damn, damn.

Panic built in his gut as the disaster unfolded below. Piper was going to die. Or if she was unlucky, she wouldn't die. At least not right away. Not before they tortured and debased her in the most inhumane possible fashion.

He could say a lot about the overall level of ignorance in this town, but the bastards were freaking geniuses when it came to thinking up creative ways to torture another human being in the most barbaric possible fashion.

He had to do *something*. Pressure built in his chest until it felt like his ribcage was going to explode.

Time slowed to a crawl as he weighed the options. He'd always been a proponent of keeping work and his personal life separate, and here was exactly why. Save the woman he'd slept with, or stay out of trouble, stay invisible, keep doing his job and just observe. But Piper was forcing his hand. He couldn't let her die...or worse.

Dammit, he *had* to let her go down to whatever fate she'd written for herself. He had a duty to his career. Hell, his country. The proper thing to do was sit tight right here and let the chips fall where they might...

...and fuck it. He so wasn't going to do the proper thing.

Spy or not, independent operator or not, interfering with his mission or not, Piper was an American national. And a woman. He couldn't sit here and watch them beat, torture, and kill her because she was too stupid to keep her big, fat mouth shut. He was going to save her, and he was going to blow his own cover in the process. His bosses were going to be royally pissed.

Shut. Up. Piper.

Nope, she didn't hear him silently shouting at her one last time. Crap. And now she had a finger under the cop's nose and was shaking it at the guy.

They would flay her alive right there in the street. She'd be lucky to live long enough to get hauled off to jail and passed around among the guards. As a western woman, she would be classed a whore and used as such.

Swearing in a continuous stream, he jumped up and bolted for the stairwell. He had an idea, but it all hinged on getting to

her before another carload of religious cops arrived. He raced down to the street, sprinting for all he was worth toward the crowd gathering around Piper and the two cops. He shoved forward, knocking people out of the way like bowling pins.

He bellowed in Arabic, “These police are El Noori stooges! They came into this neighborhood to attack Dharwani women. They misuse their position to show disrespect to our women and blaspheme the name of Allah. They are frauds!”

The crowd froze in shock. And then a low, angry buzz began to build.

He gestured toward the tall woman—who turned out to be a teenaged girl—and her companion whom Piper had saved. They cowered against the building at their backs, trapped by the gathering crowd and unable to make an escape.

He yelled, “Are we going to let El Noor’s men cane our women in the streets as if they are common whores? These are God-fearing women, and those animals would abase our wives and daughters! Will we let those black-hatted bastards rape them next?”

The buzz grew into a roar. The crowd heaved and swayed around him, growing quickly as people melted onto the street and joined the seething mob. Other voices began to shout insults at the two religious policemen. The crowd began to jump up and down in a tribal ritual as old as Africa, the entire mob circling slowly to the left. The rotating crowd collapsed in upon itself in a crushing mass of grabbing hands and violent intent.

He looked around frantically for Piper. There. He spotted her just as someone banged into her from behind. She went down to her knees. Frantic, he jumped forward, dragging her to her feet as the crowd surged around them. *Fuck*. She’d lost her hat and her blond hair spilled down around her face in a blatantly feminine display.

Thankfully, the crowd was too focused on the religious police to notice her. Yet. A mob like this could turn in an instant.

“We need to get out of here,” he shouted at her in English over the din.

“Ya think?” she shouted back.

He spared a scowl for her and shouldered his way through the mob.

Male screams erupted from the center of the enraged ring of locals. The crowd roared and nearly knocked him off his feet as it heaved forward. Someone must have hit the religious cops.

Once the mob saw blood, the feeding frenzy would begin in earnest. He only hoped he and Piper were far enough from the epicenter of the violence to avoid the fallout. If El Noor was smart, he would attack this instant. Hell, the crowd would turn on itself, it was so blindly enraged.

Ian used his height, bulk, and sheer brute strength to muscle a path through the crowd. Piper clung to his belt like it was her only lifeline. Which probably wasn’t far from the truth. They burst clear of the mob. Dusk was settling around them.

“C’mon,” he growled. What in the hell was he supposed to do with her now? Her cover was blown. The locals knew she was a *she*, and furthermore, that she was a foreigner. He had to get her off the street and properly robed ASAP, before the mob he’d stirred up turned on her.

Swearing under his breath, he started out toward his place. He’d paid enough protection money to the locals over the past several months that she ought to be safe there.

“Where are we going?” she panted, hustling to keep up with his running stride.

“My place.” They ran for several blocks, until things quieted around them enough for running to draw more attention than walking. He slowed to a rapid walk.

“Don’t you want to stick around and observe the situation?”

“That’s what I was doing when you decided to play Rambo,” he retorted dryly.

“He was beating that girl for showing her ankles! She explained to him that she’d grown taller recently and her family couldn’t afford longer robes for her. Somebody had to do *something*!”

“And that somebody just had to be you?” He felt a certain reluctant admiration for her courage and commitment to doing the right thing, but not if it was going to get her killed.

She scowled. “Look. I just blew my mission and probably my career. But an innocent girl’s life was at stake.”

“I know the feeling,” he snapped, the syllables as bitter as the metallic dust in his mouth. “You just screwed up my mission, too.”

By the time his bosses at Defense Intelligence got a replacement observer read in and placed over here, EL Noor’s Palestinian contact would be long gone. And the U.S. would have no idea where or when he or any other terrorist planned to strike.

He’d gotten confirmation from a local source that a Palestinian had been seen in Khartoum recently. And rumor had it the Palestinian was on El Noor’s payroll. Some kind of scientist.

Nobody seemed to know what kind of scientist, however. Ian’s local informants were just beginning to trust him enough to fork over timely and legit intel. He was close to finding out what El Noor was up to. Very close. He felt it in his bones.

And now he was going to have to fucking bug out and abandon the whole op because Piper couldn’t keep her damn Pollyanna streak in check.

He turned around abruptly and she ran right into his chest. He grabbed her upper arms and yanked her up against him, nose to nose, snarling furiously, “Some girl getting a beating is kid stuff in Khartoum. She was probably lying there thanking her

lucky stars that he didn't chop her feet off. She wasn't fucking worth blowing your cover—*and mine*—over.”

“That's cold hearted of you,” she snarled back.

“Get your head out of your ass or get out of here, Pollyanna. This is no place for do-gooders *or* hot, single females.”

He released her with a little shove and whirled away from her. He stomped off toward his hooch. Right now, he didn't give a damn if she followed or not. Let Darwinian selection do its thing. If she was too stupid to live, this place would most certainly oblige and remove her from the gene pool.

“Where are you going *now*?” she asked from beside him, sounding aggrieved.

“To pack my gear and leave. Because you blew my goddamn cover.”

“You're the one who charged in to the rescue. I didn't ask you to bail me out.” This time she was the one grabbing his arm.

He stopped again. “Uncle Sam writes my paychecks. It's my job to protect idiots like you from yourselves!”

“I didn't ask for your protection!”

“That doesn't relieve me of my duty.”

“Now who's being stupid? You're standing on a sidewalk in plain sight announcing at the top of your lungs to everyone within earshot who you are!”

She was right, and that didn't help his foul mood one damned bit. He swore under his breath and stormed away from her but froze one block shy of his digs. Very slowly, he plastered himself against a wall in the deep shadows of an alley. Something was wrong. He observed the street before him carefully.

“What do you see?” Piper breathed from behind him.

“Nothing. And that's what worries me. It's too quiet.”

Thankfully, she didn't make any ignorant comments about quiet being a good thing. Something was off. He felt it in his gut. But what?

A lone figure came into view, shuffling down the street. He knew that odd, halting gait. The blind charwoman who cooked his breakfast each day, squatting on the edge of the road beside a small wood fire. Ever since soldiers had put her eyes out a few years back, day or night made no difference to her.

“Mala,” he whispered as she drew near.

She swerved into the alley and whispered back, “Monsieur Ian?”

“*Oui. C'est moi.* Could you step closer where you cannot be seen, please?” He added playfully, “I promise, I'll behave.”

Mala swatted at his upper arm, striking it unerringly. “Who de foreign lay-dee wit' you?” she asked in her pidgin English, showing long teeth, yellow even in the last dregs of twilight.

Piper scowled. “How did she know I'm foreign?”

He suppressed a grin. Mala'd confessed to him once that the scents of soap and deodorant on foreigners' skin gave away their nationalities. But he wasn't going to be the one to share the hag's secret.

“What are you doing out on a night like this, *ma chère*?” he asked. “You know to stay inside when Dharwani and El Noor tangle.”

She shook a skinny finger with knobby knuckles at him. “To stay indoor, hidin' like a rat, da rat gotta wish ta live.”

“True,” he replied wryly. “Still. Do you need me to walk you home? A pretty young thing like you has no business teasing the boys like this.”

She cackled at that. “No, no. You take-a d' advantage of ole' Mala, met'inks..”

“Damn. You caught me.”

More cackling. “'Tis I who do you da favor dis night.”

The grin disappeared from Ian's face instantly. “How's that?”

“Me hab' message for d' foreign woman and huh' man.”

Ian frowned. *Piper's man? Not.* “What's the message, Mala?”

“Someone wanna talk ta youze. Jus' talk.”

“Yeah, right.”

“His word on it, Monsieur Ian.”

“Who?”

“Dharwani.”

“Sifwan Dharwani? In the flesh?”

The charwoman nodded. “Dat girl you save. His sister's daughter. He wanna t'ank you right.” Her sightless eye sockets turned unerringly toward Piper. “Bof'of ya.”

Ian didn't bother to look over at his companion. He could do without 'I told you so's out of her. He asked Mala, “Where is Dharwani?”

“I take-a youze ta him.”

He glanced over at Piper and muttered, “You packing?” And her answer had *better* be yes or he was going to take her over his knee and blister her butt for jumping Sudanese law enforcement types without a fucking firearm in her possession.

She nodded once, tersely, in the affirmative.

He commented under his breath, "It could be dangerous for us to go back into the hot zone to make this contact. It could be a trap."

"He'd be a hell of a contact to make, though," Piper replied low. "Particularly if he's feeling grateful."

That sent Ian's eyebrows skyward. An astute observation. "What the hell. Lead on, Mala."

The blind woman shuffled further into the alley, back toward the way they'd come. Ian glanced over at Piper. "Are you going to be able to keep your mouth shut and act like a properly respectful woman?"

She blinked owlishly, with exaggerated slowness, at him. Sarcastically, if he wasn't mistaken.

He rolled his eyes and muttered, "Only way you're going to come off as respectable is if you pretend to be my wife."

"Why not your sister?" Piper retorted quickly. Nervous about posing as his woman, was she? Even after all the gnarly things they'd done to each other?

At least she didn't argue about being under his protection. "I have no reason to bring my sister into a hellhole like this. But I might bring my wife to take care of my...needs. And a dutiful wife would follow her husband to Hades and back."

"Jeebus," she muttered in disgust.

Privately he shared her opinion, but he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of saying so.

They followed Mala's shambling progress in silence for several blocks. The waiting stillness over the whole city was palpable and worrisome. Fun with pulverizing religious cops must be over. He flinched to consider the reprisals that would land on this neighborhood because of it. No help for it, though. He'd done his duty and saved the American citizen.

He didn't see any movement whatsoever as they approached the street where the incident had occurred.

Mala murmured, "Dharwani's boys, dey tied dose El Noori boy's bodies to Jeeps and drag-ee dem past El Noor's compound."

Piper swore under her breath. "They're *asking* to be shot."

Ian retorted, "And the alternative—continuing to live in this hellhole—is any better?"

Piper was silent, but Mala snorted. "Monsieur Ian, he understan' Khartoum."

Yeah. Well enough to know that this meeting with Dharwani was an enormous risk. It could be a huge coup for him to make the contact, or it could be a death trap. He would feel better if he went in by himself. Piper was too big an unknown at this point. Unpredictable. And so damned naive! But he doubted he'd get in to see Dharwani without her.

Mala took Piper's arm and let herself be led along for another block until Mala told them where to turn. The woman's sense of direction was uncanny.

Mala stopped. "Chile', no respec'ible woman wear dese boy clothes. Ya gotta not mak-ee Dharwani mad. Here be my *melaya*. It be no proper *abeya*, but it be better 'dan nothin'." The woman peeled off her outer wrap, leaving her dessicated body swimming in a voluminous caftan that hardly revealed more than her previous covering.

"I'll return it to you as soon as I can," Piper murmured.

Ian was startled when she deftly tucked one end of the voluminous piece of cloth under her left arm, wrapped it around her body like a bath towel, draped the long end over her head, and then anchored the loose end around her left forearm. Voila. Instant transformation from commando chick into female biblical figure. Freaky.

Mala's bony hand pointed across the street. "Ovuh' dere."

He looked over at a block-long series of boarded up storefronts. So this was Dharwani's home base, eh? Good to know. He filed the tidbit for his next, and last, report.

He stepped off the crumbling curb and Piper did the same beside him. Instantly, a pair of heavily armed men stepped out of the shadows on the other side of the boulevard, a silent challenge. There would be more where those two came from.

"Three paces behind me," he hissed.

She dropped back immediately. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure her eyes were appropriately lowered. Surprisingly enough, they were. Now, if she could just behave herself through the rest of this outing, maybe they'd both get out of it alive.

A bloody big 'if' to hang his neck on.

The small of Piper's back still tingled from where McCloud's hand had briefly come to rest on it as they were shown into Dharwani's house and introduced themselves. *His wife*. The notion was titillating.

She wondered idly if he had a real wife back home. She seriously doubted it given the way he'd fallen into the sack with her. That and the way he'd stumbled a little over calling her Mrs. McCloud. The guy'd looked shell-shocked to hear the words coming out of his mouth. She would've ribbed him about it if it wouldn't have blown their cover.

It wasn't as if she was ever going to marry. She was all about the job. About establishing her credentials and playing with the big boys. Proving she could do the same work as the men and do it just as well, if not better. Her boss had finally given her a legit field op. It even had the sex and danger. Now all she needed were drugs and rock-and-roll, and she would have it all.

She shook her head. Guys like McCloud were trouble. She knew the score. They would float in and out of women's lives without a backward glance. But then, that was her M.O., too. The two of them were perfect for each other.

Piper stared at the long, food-laden table in Dharwani's dining room, surprised. Huh. This was going to be a celebratory feast? A thank-you for saving his niece?

Huh. Who'd have guessed there was any honor left in this shell of a failed civilization? Still, she kept her guard up as she was politely seated with the women, down the table a ways from Ian, and served a heaping plate of exotic North African fare.

Where did Dharwani get all of this bounty? More accurately, where did a local thug get the wealth to fund such opulence? His little strip of Khartoum real estate, comprised of a few dozen struggling family-owned businesses, couldn't possibly be netting him this kind of cash.

Hmm. What else could Dharwani be dealing in? Information? Terrorists for hire? Was *this* the guy the PHP representatives were in Khartoum to meet...and maybe pay for some service?

She'd spotted one of the PHP leaders in a hotel lobby in the respectable part of town a week ago but had been forced to duck out of sight lest she be spotted, herself. By the time she'd dared risk peeking out of her hiding spot, the PHP man had been gone.

It had been exhausting and frustrating trying to do the surveillance by herself, but it wasn't like she knew anyone trustworthy to invite to help her. She had briefly considered asking Ian to spell her and let her get one decent night's sleep, but that would involve telling him far too much about her mission. So, she'd suffered in solitude. But now, excitement filled her at possibly stumbling into success, after all.

She risked looking at Ian, seated next to their host—lucky dog. He and Dharwani conversed easily. The two men appeared to have recognized a fellow warrior in one other and bonded instantly. It was infuriating.

She was the one who'd dived in front of that religious cop to save Dharwani's niece, a gangly teen named Halma who seemed shaken after the day's attack.

Piper had tried to talk to Halma at the women's end of the dining table, but the girl threw suspicious looks at her, mumbled something about it being unclean to speak with infidels, and turned away almost immediately.

Piper couldn't exactly identify herself as the soldier who had rescued the girl. Apparently, Dharwani thought that had been Ian. And Ian was happy to let the man think so. Chauvinist jerks. Both of them.

Left to muddle along with the women, she endured stories of childbirth and chickenpox while Ian got to talk politics and religion and power struggles with a warlord. The men's conversation tickled at the edge of her hearing, offering her just enough snippets to tantalize her, but not enough to glean anything meaningful. It wasn't fair, dammit!

Ian caught her gaze and smirked at her from his place of honor.

Her gaze narrowed in promise of retribution until she abruptly remembered her 'place' in this little charade and looked down hastily. She stared down at her clenched fists until she regained her composure, and then she smiled apologetically.

across the table at her hostess.

For an instant, sympathetic understanding shone in the older woman's eyes. Yup, having to put up with men's arrogance was a universal burden of women everywhere.

Her hostess, introduced to her as Fatima Dharwani, leaned across the table. Piper had yet to figure out if she was Dharwani's wife or mother, but either way, the woman clearly reigned supreme among the other females of the house, who seemed to be a collection of near and distant relatives and servants.

Fatima glanced toward the men, lowered her voice, and asked in halting English, "You know girls? Girls to south?"

Piper was surprised enough at the woman's attempt at English that she almost missed the question itself. "Girls? To the south?"

The matriarch nodded. "The Black One...buy sick girls. He make them in...how you say...lorry...away they go. No one see again. No come back."

"Lorry? You mean a truck? How many girls?"

"Yes, yes. *Vrooom*. Truck.

"How many girls?" Piper repeated.

"Thirteen. Twenty. Dying fever or blood sick."

Piper frowned. A fever from this region that killed people? The ebola outbreak that had ravaged West Africa last year had never really caught a foothold in the eastern part of the continent. "Lassa Fever?" she tried.

A vigorous nod. "Yes, yes. Lassa."

Blood sick. What was that? "Hemophilia?" she guessed.

"No, no. All body make blood..." Fatima touched her gums, then pointed to her eyes and belly. "Blood everywhere. Then die."

Comprehension dawned. The woman *was* talking about a hemorrhagic fever. Here? In the Sudan? Piper breathed, "Ebola?"

"Ebola, yes. *And* Lassa." A vigorous nod.

Why on earth would anyone ship truckloads of girls out into the countryside, or perhaps more accurately, away from Khartoum to places unknown? Was Dharwani running a prostitution or slavery ring? Is that how he got so rich? But with sick girls?

Fully a third of all Lassa victims died, and Ebola mortality could run in the 95 to 98 percent range under the right conditions. Even with the best medical care available, Ebola mortality ran a solid 50%. Although progress had been made in developing treatments during the big Ebola outbreak of 2014, commercial quantities of antivirals to fight it had been too slow in coming.

Regardless, with both of the fevers Fatima had named, the illness and death were messy, painful, and by the end, extremely contagious. Not the stuff of prostitution.

Piper reviewed the brief conversation so far, looking for more clues to the woman's meaning. Fatima said The Black One was buying the girls. *The Black One*. A bolt of understanding struck her. "Black" translated to *noir* in French. *El Noor*. Got it.

Piper leaned forward urgently. "El Noor is trucking girls with Lassa and ebola to the south. What's he doing with them?"

A shrug. "No come home. *Poof*. Gone."

"To South Sudan?" Piper asked. "Or just to the southern part of North Sudan?"

"South Sudan. Cross border. No follow. No find."

Why was this woman telling her all this? Fatima was staring at her expectantly. Piper mumbled, "Uhh, thank you. That's very interesting."

The woman rocked back on her cushion, expansively satisfied. As if Piper had comprehended something vitally important at long last.

But she didn't understand anything at all. Why in the world was El Noor shipping sick girls to South Sudan? Surely, he wasn't trafficking the young women. They would be far too expensive to restore to health. God knew, there were plenty of impoverished, homeless, *healthy* young women who could be kidnapped into the slave trade.

She glanced up the table at Ian and was startled to see a grave look upon his face. Dharwani was leaning close, whispering in Ian's ear. Apparently, this was the true confessions course of dinner.

Ian nodded once, tightly, and Dharwani leaned back, speaking volubly once more. He made a short speech about his gratitude for Ian's rescue of his niece, and for exposing the El Noori spies pretending to be religious police.

Yeah, right. She would bet he'd be singing that tune to anyone who'd listen for the next few weeks. It was that or bring the local Muslim clerics and Sudanese government down on his back like a ton of bricks for allowing his people to tear two legitimate religious policemen limb from limb.

While servants commenced clearing the table, Fatima waved Piper to her feet. To her chagrin, Piper was led away from the men and into a small, stuffy sitting room with the other women. She felt naked and exposed without McCloud nearby to keep an eye on her and rescue her if need be.

Someone turned on a CD player, while Fatima pulled out a water pipe and commenced smoking. It smelled too sweet for

tobacco. Must be hashish.

Blue, pungent smoke swirled thickly around Piper and a headache began to pulse at the base of her neck. Just what she needed. To get stoned with a bunch of Sudanese women while McCloud picked up all the hot intel. Which she had utter faith he would keep to himself and refuse to share with her.

Several of the teen girls began to dance, not in the traditional Middle Eastern style, however. Rather, they gyrated in a hideous parody of twerking that made her giggle uncontrollably. Crap. She was getting high on the fumes.

She fought to concentrate on the gossip floating around her. It took nearly an hour, but she was finally able to turn the women's conversation—which was taking on a distinctly slurred quality—to the political events of the local neighborhood.

She was stunned by how much they knew. Apparently, men held private and even secret meetings with complete disregard for the women present. No doubt the assumption was that women would not understand anything they were overhearing. *Hah.*

They casually related how Dharwani was getting rich buying black market food stolen from refugee camps in Ethiopia on the cheap and reselling it to the Sudanese government. They talked of how El Noor's ambitions extended far beyond Sudan. How El Noor was getting funding from Muslim charities overseas, and bribing government officials to tolerate his power grab in return for his foot soldiers driving out the Christian coalition. And how two white men had come to town recently.

The haze from the hashish smoke cleared sharply from her head. *Were the white men American?* The women thought so. They had pale skin and one had orange hair—a fact which made the women laugh like drunk hyenas.

Bingo. One of the PHP leaders was a redhead.

Sadly, the women didn't know who the white men were in Khartoum to meet. Not Dharwani, according to Fatima. Disappointed, Piper crossed her dinner host off the list of possible people the PHP guys were here to meet with. Rats.

Fatima took a long drag on the water pipe. Her eyes fogged over even more thickly. Piper could only hope the woman forgot the entire conversation they'd just had. When the hookah's mouthpiece was passed to her, Piper took a cautious suck. Her mouth filled with sweet, herbal tasting smoke. She held it in her mouth an appropriate interval, then released it without ever inhaling it into her lungs. Now she had to hope *she* didn't get too stoned to remember the conversation.

A boy came to fetch Piper not long after that. The women escorted her to a courtyard where a cluster of antsy young men milled about, their jeans and T-shirts draped in weapons and ammunition. Apparently, she and McCloud were ever so politely being kicked out. It must be El-Noor-hunting-o'clock.

Piper noticed Fatima fading back toward the kitchen, lifting a veil over her face and casting her eyes down toward the ground, and all but disappearing—literally—into the woodwork. But Piper caught the sideways look Fatima threw at her. She could swear the woman was laughing under that veil.

She wrapped Mala's *melaya* around herself, pulling its voluminous folds over her head. She caught an edge of the fabric and lifted it across her face modestly as she and McCloud were escorted through the crowd of armed youths. Local women weren't the only ones who could play that game.

She and McCloud were shown to a Jeep, and she managed to climb inside without breaking her neck in spite of being wrapped up like a mummy. Ian gave the driver curt instructions on where to go and when to pull over and drop them off. They were still a few blocks from his hooch. In this town, on this night, they might as well be ten miles from his place.

The Jeepload of soon to be dead young men, if she didn't miss her guess, drove away into the night. Heavy silence settled, eerie in the middle of a large city like this. It was as if all of Khartoum held its breath, waiting for the violence to come.

"C'mon. We've got to get off the street," McCloud muttered.

"Thanks for that update, Einstein," she muttered back.

He scowled and unzipped his gym bag, pulling out a snub-nosed MP-7 semi-automatic rifle. He slung its nylon strap over his shoulder and glanced at her. "You did remember to get your gun, didn't you?"

She scowled and lifted her left elbow. Without her left arm to anchor the *melaya* against her ribs, the fabric sheath fell away, revealing the latest version of an Israeli Tavor urban assault rifle lying close to her side.

Ian stared. "You had that on you the whole time we were at Dharwani's?"

"His men wouldn't dare frisk me. They'd go straight to hell if they laid hands on a woman in such a fashion."

"Where'd you get a hold of a Tavor, anyway?"

The state of the art Israeli weapon was all but impossible to obtain on the open market. But Doctors Unlimited had inside sources for such things. It was good working for a CIA front.

She shrugged. "You military types have to go through channels. We civilians aren't so encumbered."

He scowled. "I hear Tavors are as good as an M-16."

"Better. As effective as a sniper rifle out to around 350 meters. Low profile and maneuverable for urban assault ops. Lighter and shorter than an M-16, and the weight's concentrated back by my shoulder. Great weapon for a woman."

McCloud looked shocked that she could converse intelligently about a rifle.

"Chauvinist," she muttered.

"What'd I do?" he protested.

She didn't deign to answer. "Are we gonna stand here all night making small talk, or are we gonna move out?"

“Stay behind me,” he ordered. “If I hold up a closed fist, freeze. Open hand, palm down means to get down. If I grab my wrist and then flash you a number, that’s how many bad guys are located where I point next. If I twirl my finger by my head like this,” he demonstrated, “that means get ready to go.”

“And if I stick up my middle finger like this, it means stop treating me like a fucking amateur because I know standard military hand signals.”

A snort of laughter escaped him before he managed to glare at her. He drew his thumb and index finger across his lips and then used both hands to air draw a pair of giant breasts in front of his chest. “This one means shut up. You talk as much as a woman.”

She held up her pinkie finger, bent at the middle knuckle, and didn’t bother to translate that one.

They’d gone about two blocks, gliding from shadow to shadow, when shooting broke out somewhere ahead of them. It was distant, more of a rattle than distinct gunfire sounds. Ian ducked into an alley, and she sprinted to its other end behind him, pleased that she was able to match her steps exactly to his, masking the sound of her passing. He paused at the other end, listening and watching.

Their shoulders rubbed together and his body heat was tangible. Weird how reassuring his presence was beside her. The moon wasn’t up yet, and the night deepened around them. More gunfire erupted, this time from behind them. And close. He signaled for her to get ready to move out. She nodded, and they stepped out into the street.

All hell broke loose when they were about halfway down the block. Gunfire erupted on both sides of the street, muzzle flashes exploding like firecrackers. As for her, she would’ve ducked back into the alley they’d come from. But Ian sprinted forward and she had no choice but to follow.

The gunfire intensified into a deafening cacophony, like a firing range full of machine guns. Ian dodged to the left into a recessed storefront and she careened after him, almost losing her balance when he turned so abruptly in front of her.

“Get down!” he ordered.

She crouched beside him.

“Get inside this store. Quietly if you can. I’ll cover you.” He glided forward, toward the front of the dark cave of plywood that used to be display windows.

He was trusting her with a real job? Cool. Of course, now she had to come through and deliver or else lose his respect in the last two minutes before they both lost their lives. They were trapped in this doorway unless she could open the door at their backs.

She moved in for a closer look. An iron grille covered its outside, a plywood sheet its inside. Locked, of course. She didn’t have her lock picks with her, and besides, she wasn’t very fast with picks. She pulled out her pistol, aimed carefully, and waited until a loud burst of gunfire erupted nearby. She sent a bullet into the lock. The sound echoed around in the confined space twice as loud as a regular gunshot.

“What the hell are you doing?” McCloud bit out. “I said quietly. Are you *trying* to get us killed?”

“I’m *trying* to get us an escape route out of the dead end you led us into.”

She gave the door a tug. The lock was damaged but not quite destroyed.

“Get it open *now*...here come about eight guys.” Double taps started reverberating from immediately behind her as Ian commenced picking off the incoming hostiles.

One. Two. Morbidly, she counted them in her head as she whipped out her Tavor for a sustained burst of lead.

Three. Four. She held down her finger long enough to send a half-dozen rounds into the door.

Five. It was a horrendous waste of her limited ammo. But they were going to die if that door didn’t fly off the hinges in the next few seconds. *Six.*

“Got it,” she called out over the sounds of the seventh cluster of shots. Damn, Ian was a good shot.

“Fall back. Get inside!” he ordered.

Well, obviously.

She ducked inside a cavernous, utterly black space. Warehouse, maybe. Squinting in the darkness and unable to make out a thing, she crouched against the wall beside the door. A large shape barreled through the opening beside her. *Ian.* She felt him more than saw him.

“Go right!” she called over the barrage of gunfire nipping at his heels.

While Ian dived and rolled to the right on command, she spun into the doorway and fired a spray out into the street. Two figures flew backward. Neither moved. She yanked her weapon up and spun to the left side of the doorway.

Ian jumped back into the opening, his MP-7 at the ready. He reached forward and yanked the remains of the door shut. Complete blackness enveloped them. A momentary lull in the shooting settled around them.

“Stay here,” he ordered. “Kill anyone who tries to come through that door. He fumbled around for a moment, but she couldn’t identify what he was doing by the sound of it. Then he moved off quickly into the void. Great. The bastard was leaving her to guard his retreat while he got away.

Except as soon as the thought crossed her mind, she dismissed it. He was a natural-born hero. He would never leave the

woman behind. It was a sexist attitude on his part, but tonight she wasn't going to pick a fight with him over his subtle misogyny.

In the faint hint of light seeping past the splintered plywood, she made out Ian coming back to her side. He shoved a long something, a piece of wood maybe, through the front door handles. The wood caught on each side of the door frame. It wouldn't keep anyone really motivated from shooting their way through the door, but it would slow down a hostile for a few moments.

She made out something else. A bulky block protruding from the middle of Ian's forehead and covering his eyes. Night optical devices. Her first reaction should have been relief. But honestly, it was chagrin. She didn't have NOD's, dammit. A prepared operative would have brought some.

"Grab my belt," he muttered.

Great. Just what she needed. To be led around in the dark, blind and helpless, completely dependent on him for her life. Resigned to his smugness when they got out of this mess, she did as he bid. He moved out fast. She stumbled along like a drunk, her fist clenching his belt like a damned lifeline.

And then, all of a sudden, his belt dropped toward the floor, all but wrenching her arm out of the socket as she was yanked down with him. Off balance, she fell on top of him. Ian rolled on top of her fast.

She lost her grip on his belt—not that it mattered. She knew precisely where he was located from her collarbones to the tip of her toes. Every hard, heavy, muscular inch of him.

A hand clapped over her mouth. She started to fight but then realized from the angle that it was Ian's hand.

He breathed, "Still got that cloth wrap thing Mala gave you?"

She nodded under his hand.

"Very quietly, spread it over us. We've got company."

Ian rolled onto his back, taking Piper with him so she lay on top of him, now. An instant's awareness of how good she felt registered, but then his mind snapped back to the crisis at hand.

He looked around in the lime green gloom of what used to be some sort of clothing warehouse. Abandoned clothing racks littered the space, along with chunks of plaster and concrete fallen from the ceiling. But of much more interest and alarm was the red beam of infrared light that had slashed through the space a moment ago.

Invisible to the naked eye, infrared lasers were often attached to weapons as sights. The shooter then wore a special pair of goggles that allowed him to see the red dot land on his target. The trick was to be wearing the right goggles. It just so happened his French Thales goggles had an IR mode, and it just so happened he'd had it activated when that line of infrared energy sliced across the room.

As Piper wiggled and squirmed, trying to get her cloth shawl thing spread across them, he eased out from under her. They had to be plastered together side-by-side for the cloth to cover them both, but he made sure they ended up side-by-side on their bellies in prone shooting positions. Of course, without NOD's, Piper was blind as a bat. And a blind sniper was about as useful as a virgin in a whorehouse.

Something warm and moist touched his ear. He jumped, then settled when he realized it was Piper's mouth. Jeez, it was weird working with a woman!

She breathed, "Who's out there?"

He answered as quietly, "Infrared targeting beam. I think it came from the side window. Dunno if the shooter saw our heat signatures or not."

"Room layout?"

"Twenty feet wide, sixty feet front to back. Door we came in is at seven o'clock, range: forty feet. Clothing racks and shelving are scattered behind us. Exit eleven o'clock. Desk to the left of it. One window, two feet wide by three feet tall, chest high, your eight thirty position. No glass in the window. Plywood covering. One more window your one o'clock. Partially covered with wood. Lotta debris on the floor."

"In other words, we're fish in a barrel."

He opened his mouth to answer, but the infrared beam sliced across the room again, zooming toward them like a jackal scenting fresh meat. He grabbed the back of Piper's neck and shoved her head to the floor. His cheek pressing into cold concrete, he watched tensely as the red beam skimmed inches above them and passed by.

Piper whispered, "Do you have a shot?"

"No visual on the shooter."

"I'm useless in these conditions, and we've got to draw this guy out. I'll make a run for the back door. When he pops up to shoot, you take him out."

He hissed, "Are you nuts?"

"You got a better idea?"

"I might not get my shot off before he kills you."

He felt her slender shoulder shrug upward beside him. And then her lush mouth settled disconcertingly against his ear again. "It's your reflexes against his. I'll take my chances that you're faster. It's better than laying here until he spots us and waxes us both. He obviously saw us come in here or he wouldn't be looking so hard."

Unfortunately, her assessment was correct. But he hated like hell to use a civilian—a woman—as bait. It went against every protective instinct ingrained in his gut.

"Ready?" she murmured. Her hands came up under her chest preparatory to pushing up. "You call it."

He lowered his eye to his rifle sight and trained it on the window ahead of him. “Go on three.”

“Good shooting.”

He waited until the infrared beam started another sweep, this time toward the front of the warehouse. “On my mark.” He sighted in of the source of the beam. “One.” Utter relaxation flowed through his entire body. “Two.” He began a long slow exhalation. A final sigh of breath, “Three.”

Piper jumped up and took off running. She bumped into a stack of packing crates, which she pushed to the floor. She swore loudly and kicked some debris around with her foot. On cue, the infrared beam swung toward her.

C’mon. Show yourself. The sniper wasn’t moving into sight in the window! Piper was going to die for nothing!

“Dive!” Ian shouted at her. He jumped up and charged the window. Piper took a running fall, rolling into a shelf unit with a grunt. The beam was still on her. Dammit!

With a wordless shout, he rushed the window, shooting randomly through the glass. Finally, the beam of death swung toward him. The shooter came into view, a white blob of heat. Ian didn’t think. Didn’t stop to aim. He just took a flying leap and, laid out in mid-air, weapon still plastered to his eye and shoulder, took the shot. He double tapped the trigger, but the first shot vaporized the shooter’s head.

He landed hard, the weapon slamming into his shoulder. His entire right arm went numb. “You okay, Piper?” His NOD’s had been knocked askew and he couldn’t see her in the sudden dark.

“Yes. You?”

“Five by five. Stay where you are. I’ll come get you.”

He climbed to his feet, his right arm stinging like hell. He yanked the NOD’s back down over his eyes, gave them a whack, and they came back on. The French might have their foibles, but they made sturdy military optics. The room lit up in lime green. He made his way over to Piper and reached down for her.

“You okay?” she asked as he pulled her to her feet.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Sounded like you went down hard.”

“I’ve walked fifty clicks on a broken leg. I’m fine.”

“That’s right. I forgot you’re a miracle of modern testosterone.”

He rolled his eyes and led her to the back door. “Doesn’t look boarded over from the outside. If we bust the lock, it ought to open.”

“Be my guest, Macho Man. I’m as blind as a bat.”

“Bats see pretty well, you know. And their sonar puts eyesight to shame.”

“Whatever. Just get the door open and let’s get out of here.”

He used his sidearm, a 9 mm Beretta, to blow the lock open. Quick look left and right. Alley. No hostiles in sight. He got his bearings and moved off to the right, toward his hidey hole.

The gun battle raged one block over now, but they were able to move mostly unimpeded. They ducked down another street and, without warning, somebody took a pot shot at them. But the bullet winged way wide. Probably some terrified kid. Who needed bedtime stories when a real-life drama like this was playing out under your nose? Hell of a way for kids to grow up.

“You got a flash bang?” she muttered.

He blinked, startled by Piper’s question. “Yes.”

“We need a diversion to get across this street. Yesterday when I was scoping out this area, there were at least a dozen rebels strolling around like it was home sweet home. I think the shooter who just tried for us isn’t alone.”

Good thing she’d run a recent recon in this neighborhood. It had been a solid week since he’d eyeballed this sector. He pulled out a flash bang—a grenade designed to create mostly noise and sound, and murmured, “When it blows, you run for it. I’ll cover you. When you reach that alley over there, turn and cover me.”

She nodded grimly.

He couldn’t believe he’d just said that. He was entrusting his life to this civilian female. “Five second delay,” he muttered. He pulled the pin and lobbed the grenade. He muttered, “One monkey. Two monkey…”

When he reached four, she took off running. Right about when any lurking snipers could acquire her as a target, the flash bang blew. She swerved, righted herself, and kept on running. Grimly, he jumped off the curb and sprinted for Piper. He was a sitting duck. Every watching eye on the whole street would be trained on where that explosion had just happened, and unlike her, he didn’t have the distraction of an explosion to make them miss their shot.

He was startled when a muzzle flash lit up from the mouth of the alley Piper had just dived into. Another one. Two more in quick succession. Cries accompanied each shot. If she was actually acquiring and hitting hard targets with each of those shots, she was as fast as a pissed off rattlesnake snake.

He dived for the darkness beside her and rolled against a wall as the ground behind him exploded in a puff of dirt. Damn, that was close.

“Thanks,” he grunted.

“No prob. Let’s move out before any of these jerks decide to rush us.”

“The way you were picking ‘em off? Not likely.”

Nonetheless, he climbed to his feet and took up a point position. Abruptly, his back felt a whole lot safer. That girl was hell on wheels with a firearm.

They had to sprint the last block full out as some sort of armored vehicle cruised into the area. He highly doubted it was the government trying to restore order. More likely, El Noor had a new toy and was looking for some buildings to blow up.

Ian jammed the key in his front door lock and slipped inside as a small armored vehicle came into sight. Piper jumped in behind him and he kicked the door shut just as the armored vehicle’s spotlight swung down the alley.

Jesus, that was too close. The embracing darkness of the stairwell wrapped around them. He listened tensely until he heard the vehicle rumble away into the night.

Safe. For now.

Piper panted against him and their chests collided as he, too, sucked wind. The deep silence of the thick walls around them was a shock to his senses after the chaos outside.

“We good?” she gasped.

“Yeah,” he replied, nearly as winded as she was. “Nice job out there.”

“Hark. Was that a compliment out of the badass commando?”

“Don’t make a big deal of it or I won’t give you any more.”

He felt her smile in the dark as warmth and amusement rolled off of her. An urge to pull her close and kiss that smile into oblivion nearly overcame him. But no, he was not going to repeat their last adrenaline-fueled hook up. He knew better.

But damn, he’d missed her.

Maybe he just missed human contact with someone who had something in common with him. The same language, the same country, the same political allegiance. But still. It didn’t hurt that a friendly face came packaged in such a sexy body that was all fiery female.

Mentally fighting a surreal battle with himself over sex or no sex, he climbed the staircase and unlocked the upstairs door, letting them into his abode.

Piper sighed in relief behind him. The soft sound fluttered down his spine like a lover’s touch. It was gentle and feminine in the midst of his hard-edged, razor-sharp world. Foreign. Fantastic. Frightening.

He felt as if he was falling in slow motion, gradually losing his mooring to reality. Women did not exist in his world, nor did he let outsiders of any gender into it. And yet, Piper was sliding past his defenses seemingly without effort, as easily as breathing. With each inhalation, he was drawing her a little deeper into his life. And it scared the living crap out of him.

They’d made it out of hell alive and cheated death. Moreover, they’d found each other again in the midst of the chaos. How many more miracles could one night serve up to them?

Piper was really getting tired of stumbling into the middle of freaking gun battles. And she was equally tired of being rescued by Ian McCloud. Not that she wasn’t grateful for the rescues, but she wasn’t exactly an amateur. She’d been an undercover field observer for the CIA for a few years, now. She’d just never worked in a place like Khartoum.

Most of her jobs to date had involved long hours staring through binoculars at low-value targets and days upon weeks of mind-numbing boredom. This place was anything but dull. And not just because Ian McCloud had blasted into her life like an erupting volcano and completely taken her by storm.

He was a problem on several levels. First, she hated the idea of not being able to take care of herself. She’d learned a long time ago the only person she could depend on was herself. People made promises they couldn’t or wouldn’t keep. Hearts got broken, and bad things happened to girls who trusted too much.

Second, her job was to be invisible. She’d been sliding around town giving vaccinations and vitamin shots to children, and no one had paid the slightest attention to her. She was just another goody-two-shoes NGO aid worker.

But Ian saw her with a clarity and completeness that was alarming. Most men didn’t give her the time of day. He’d not only stripped away the layers of her deceit, but he’d instantly recognized and exploited her emotional neediness. No other guy had gotten her remotely near a bed, let alone naked and screaming in one, almost before she knew his name. Ian McCloud’s ability to bust through all her defenses like they were flimsy toys scared her to death.

And now she was alone with him again. After nearly dying. Chock full of adrenaline and relief surging through her veins. *And horny as heck*, she reluctantly admitted to herself. Or maybe it was just the company that put her in such a state.

She let her Tavor rifle slide to the floor. Her ammo belt was abnormally light as she unbuckled it. She’d used most of the ammunition stored in it. It landed beside her weapon with barely a sound.

Ian moved around quietly in the unlit apartment and it dawned on her he must be using his night optical devices again. Frustrated at the thick darkness, she listened hard. It sounded like he was covering the windows.

A match flared. The gentle glow of an oil lamp flickered to life. She watched Ian replace its glass globe, and soft light diffused his hidey hole. Yup. Big pieces of plywood covered every window.

By lamplight his place looked mysterious. Exotic. Sensual. Of course, the warrior standing in the middle of the space might have a little something to do with that impression.

She watched, enthralled, as he pulled two glasses out of a cabinet and set them on the table. A liquor bottle thunked down beside them. He poured healthy shots of clear liquid in both glasses and handed her one. In honor of the vodka, she muttered in Russian, “*Na zdorovye.*”

“To your health as well,” he replied.

Spoke Russian, did he?

She slammed back the vodka, grimacing as it burned her esophagus from one end to the other. He held the bottle out and she held her glass up to him for a refill. She waited until he’d poured himself another shot, and they clinked glasses. She tossed back the second dose of liquid fire.

The first shot destroyed enough nerves to make this one go down considerably less painfully.

He held out the bottle questioningly, and she shook her head. “Are you trying to get me drunk, McCloud?”

His voice low and rough, he answered, “Now why would I do a thing like that?”

Her eyes narrowed. He wasn’t trying to get into her pants again, was he? Not that she would put up much of a fight if he tried.

He surprised her by asking, “How’d your conversation with Dharwani’s wife go?”

“Informative. Women in this culture see and hear everything.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked casually. “Like what?”

“You know I can’t tell you,” she answered reproachfully.

He sprawled on the couch, the bottle dangling from his fist, looking so tasty she could hardly stop herself from jumping on him and devouring him. “Aww, c’mon, Piper. You know I’m one of the good guys.”

“I know you’re good in bed. I don’t know the first thing about your moral compass or political affiliations.”

He raised the bottle to her in salute. “Good in bed, huh? You’re not half bad yourself.”

She flopped down beside him. All the running they’d done earlier was starting to catch up with her as exhaustion made her limbs heavy. Or maybe it was just the vodka slamming her. He was *so* trying to get her drunk.

But speaking of information picked up at Dharwani’s, she blurted, “What did Dharwani whisper in your ear after supper that made you look so grim?”

He shrugged and took a pull straight from the bottle. “Sorry. Classified.”

She lifted the bottle out of his hand and took a swig. “I’ll tell if you’ll tell.”

“You first.”

“Nope,” she replied. “I’m not nearly drunk enough for that.”

“Well then, by all means, let’s fix that.” He took a drink and passed the bottle back to her.

She tipped it to her mouth, and without warning he reached over and nudged the bottom of the bottle upward, sending a gush of vodka down her throat. She choked and coughed but swallowed most of the fiery alcohol. In seconds, her head began to spin and a sensation of floating a few inches above the sofa kicked in.

“You are a bad man, Ian McCloud.”

He grinned, flashing her his sexy dimples. Those things should be registered as lethal weapons. “I am bad, aren’t I?” He lifted the bottle out of her hand and took another pull. “But not so bad I’d let a lady drink alone.”

“Gee. That’s downright gentlemanly of you.”

His smile widened. “You bring out the best in me.”

She shook her head at his line of bull. He was a charming devil, all right. Emphasis on devil.

Ian surprised her by saying, “Dharwani told me the Palestinian I’ve been looking for is being called The Scientist by locals. He was spotted in Khartoum some weeks ago but appears to have left town. Dharwani suggested I follow the money trail to find him.”

He’d been tracking a Palestinian, huh? The Scientist? The Terrorist, more likely. But hey. Ian had finally trusted her enough to tell her something about his mission here.

’Bout damned time. A cozy feeling that had nothing to do with the vodka’s heat spread through her.

She reciprocated in kind. “The Americans I’ve been tracking call themselves PHP. I spotted them in a hotel in downtown Khartoum last week, but Fatima—which is to say, Dharwani—doesn’t know who they’re here to meet.”

“Maybe you should follow the money trail on them, too,” Ian suggested.

She shrugged. “Not my area of expertise.”

“Tell your employer to track it down.”

She shrugged. She wasn’t in the habit of telling her boss what to do. Ever.

He frowned. “Your targets are Americans, huh? Not many of them have business in this part of the world.”

“Hence my interest in why a pair of bubbas from Idaho would come to Khartoum.”

Ian looked startled. “Bubbas from Idaho? Wow. That is weird. And you’ve got no idea why they’re here?”

She shook her head. She did, in fact, have a few ideas, but none she cared to share with anyone.

“What were they up to back in Idaho?” Ian asked.

“Putting out poorly punctuated pamphlets about returning America to the values that made it a great country, starting with getting rid of all modern technology,” she replied. “And with a healthy dose of racism and xenophobia thrown in.”

“Luddites, huh?”

She shrugged. “The original 19th century Luddites in England smashed textile machinery that replaced human artisans. To date, the PHP haven’t shown any inclination to resort to violence. But this little junket to Sudan make me wonder if that’s about to change. Hence, my interest in what they’re doing here.”

What does PHP stand for?”

“Patrick Henry Patriots.”

“Hmm. He was a bit of a radical in his day.”

She replied, “Although he was stridently opposed to federal government, he never actually advocated terrorism.”

“What about the whole, ‘Give me liberty or give me death’ speech?”

She leaned forward eagerly. “Did you know that quote was only attributed to him decades after he’d died, in a biography? There’s no evidence he actually said those words. In fact, he was less of a radical than elementary school history books give him credit for.”

Ian replied thoughtfully, “A bunch of bubbas in Idaho probably wouldn’t make that distinction.”

“Nope. Not hardly,” she responded sourly.

Ian took another pull on the vodka. “What’s your assessment of these PHP guys?”

He was interested in her opinion? Whoa. She should get him half-drunk more often.

She shrugged. “Hard to tell what they really want. They have a fenced and heavily guarded compound that no outsiders are allowed inside. They don’t make trouble in the local area. Live almost entirely off the grid. Self-sufficient bunch. Mostly male, ranging from their 20’s to 50’s. A few wives and girlfriends who appear as committed to the cause as the men. I would’ve called them a garden-variety separatist group until this trip to Sudan. Now, I don’t know what to think of them.”

Ian’s only contribution was to grunt, “huh,” and take another swig of vodka before commenting, “K-town doesn’t sound their style. Not many white-bread American rednecks hanging around these parts.”

“I know. Right?”

“If Dharwani’s heard about them, they must be poking around the criminal underbelly of this town. Could they be looking to buy black-market military hardware?” Ian suggested.

She frowned. “Doesn’t fit their profile. They strike me as the kind to make a grand political statement rather than a simple terrorist attack.”

“I dunno. A man-portable missile through the front door of the U.S. Capitol Building would be a hell of a political statement.”

“Maybe,” she said doubtfully. But her gut told her that wasn’t what the PHP guys were up to. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on her part. They had shown themselves to be long-term planners. And they were certainly capable of plotting and executing a terrorist attack they perceived to be a grand political statement.

But why Sudan? Why Khartoum? She’d been asking herself those questions obsessively ever since she got here and still had no answers.

Frustrated, she turned her attention to Ian’s problem. “What’s your target doing here?”

He made a face. “Above my pay grade. I was just told to look out for a Palestinian who might be working the local marketplace.”

“Is he buying or selling?”

“That’s what I’m supposed to find out.”

“The Scientist, huh? What kind of scientist?”

“No clue.”

It was an ominous moniker, though. Reminiscent of old-school biological or chemical warfare scares. They sat in silence for a minute, letting their brain cells marinate in vodka.

Eventually Ian asked, “What are you going to do next?”

“After tonight, I can’t very well hang around town by myself. Everyone knows I’m a girl, now. I’m pretty much dead in the water for observing, here. You?”

He nodded in commiseration. “Same. I’m blown. I’ll break the news to my boss tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry about that, by the way. But I won’t apologize for saving Dharwani’s niece from that beating. It was barbaric and uncalled for.”

Heavy silence fell between them. This mission had been a gamble for her. DO well, and her reputation in the CIA as a top operator would be made. Fail, and watch her career go down in flames...the way it was spiraling toward a fiery crash right before her eyes.

Moreose, she stared at nothing and pondered exactly how done her career was when she got back to the States. She suspected this was it for her in the field. If she was lucky, she wouldn't be fired and would only be chained to a desk for the rest of her career.

Ian broke the somber mood abruptly, declaring, "To hell with work. Let's go off the clock for a while. Whaddiya say?"

"Meaning what?" she asked cautiously.

"Meaning, how do you feel about taking a nice, long bath? Water from the roof should still be warm."

"Ohmigod," she groaned. Even the idea of a bath was enough to make her orgasmic. It was even sexier to think of doing it in Ian's bathtub.

Sheesh, she had it bad for him. She tried reminding herself that he was a casual fling and nothing more. But something in her gut didn't seem to want to listen to her.

Ian grinned. "I'll take that as a yes on the bath."

While the big tub filled, she stripped out of her clothes behind the questionable privacy of strings of beads straight out of the late 1960's that had replaced the bathroom door. Ian was undoubtedly enjoying the show, but she was too focused on her first real, immersed-in-water bath in over a month to care.

The water was only lukewarm, but she totally didn't care about that either as she sank to her neck in blessed wetness. She just sat for a while in bliss, reveling in slowly turning into a prune. Eventually, she dunked her hair and commenced giving it a good scrub. Her nails felt great against her scalp.

But then other fingers joined in, big, blunt fingertips that massaged her head and neck deliciously. She groaned and let her head fall back into Ian's hands.

"I've died and gone to Heaven," she sighed.

His hands moved from her neck to her shoulders and then dipped into the water to massage her upper arms.

"Lean forward," he murmured.

Her entire back got the full treatment from his strong, probing fingers, which found and worked out every last kink in her muscles.

Jelly. She'd turned into a gelatinous mass of gooey goodness in his hands.

"Scoot forward," he muttered in her ear.

A little confused and a lot mellow, she didn't have enough energy to ask why but merely did as he asked. A great mass of water displaced upward as he stepped into the tub behind her and sat down. Powerful legs stretched out on either side of hers and all of a sudden, a muscular body pressed against her back from neck to tailbone informatively.

"You don't fight fair," she groaned as his hands slid around her waist to cup her soap-slippery breasts.

"Never said I did."

She mumbled something incoherent that didn't even begin to resemble a word as he nibbled his way across her shoulder and kissed her neck.

By the time they'd pushed each other over the edge into oblivion, there was more water on the floor than in the tub, and a sharp chill bit into her wet skin as the ceiling fan blew across it.

Ian heaved himself upright and stepped out of the tub before bending down to scoop her up in his arms and carry her, wet and cold, to his bed. He laid her down on the cotton sheets and came back with a towel to dry her. Then he surprised her by blowing out the lamps and opening his bedroom window. A sultry breeze wafted across her body, warming and soothing her at the same time.

He stretched out beside her and she summoned the energy to roll against him, draping her leg and arm across his big heater of a body. She warmed quickly and made a sound of contentment as she nestled under his arm, her head on his shoulder.

The last words she heard before she passed out were, "Sleep, Piper. I've got you."

Ian stared at the dark ceiling, listening the distant sporadic sounds of gunfire. What the hell was he doing? He never had meaningful sex with women.

He'd learned long ago that, if he didn't kick the groupies to the curb immediately after the conclusion of sexual concourse, they interpreted being allowed to stay as practically a proposal of marriage. All the guys like him knew that groupies became stalkers at the drop of a hat.

He'd also learned a long time ago never to use the women he worked with as his dating pool. And, given that his work for the last decade had pretty much not included any women, it hadn't been hard to abide by his long-standing rule.

Frankly, it felt strange to find a woman in his work environment. He came from a family full of boys. He'd mostly hung out with the guys on the football team in high school. In college, he'd hung out with his frat brothers. Then, into the military, and straight into the Special Forces.

Come to think of it, he'd never spent much time around women. Ever. Maybe that was why he was finding it impossible to actually sleep with one sprawled across him, now.

And this particular woman...he couldn't seem to keep his damned hands off her. She was mesmerizing. So beautiful and sexy; all those miles of sleek legs and soft curves.

Not to mention, she could match him shot for shot with a handgun and a sniper rig—and then throw back shots of vodka like a pro, for God's sake. How was he supposed to resist that?

She'd blown his cover completely to hell, and he couldn't seem to generate even a smidgin of irritation at her for it. No question, he had it bad for Piper Roth.

He was going to have to leave Khartoum because of her, and his only regret was that he wasn't going to see her again. Well, maybe that wasn't entirely true. He deeply regretted the idea of not having hot sex with her, again.

She shifted against him, settling closer to his side, her head on his shoulder and her silky hair spread out over his chest. It was strangely comfortable. Who'd have guessed he could enjoy spending the night actually sleeping with a female? Bizarre.

In the midst of his newly discovered contentment, something dark wormed its way into his brain. He frowned up at the shadowed ceiling, struggling to put a name to it.

Fear. He was afraid of the way this woman made him feel.

Him. A hardened warrior, veteran of war zones from one corner of the globe to the other. Bloody terrified of a woman.

First thing in the morning, he was sending her on her way, and he was never looking back. Navy Intel would assign him to some other post on a far-flung continent, and he would get on with his regularly scheduled—female-free—life.

A plan in place, he closed his eyes and willed sleep to come.

He waited.

And waited.

Yeah, that wasn't working.

He swore for a while in his head.

Fine. He would just lay here and enjoy the novel sensation of cuddling with a woman, then.

Tomorrow. She was out of here, tomorrow.

Piper woke up slowly, well-rested and blissfully content. The room was dim and cool, but the chest under her ear was warm.

Whoa. The chest? Her eyes popped fully open. The room spun a little and then settled, a garish seraglio of a bedroom took shape around her.

Right. Ian's hidey hole.

Vodka.

The bathtub. Oh God, the bathtub.

And the sex.

Memory of last night slammed into her like a tidal wave.

Intense desire to do all of it again hit her in the next wave. And then, a distant third, came the undertow of shame. She was supposed to be a professional. Supposed to be proving to herself and her superiors that she could play in the big leagues. That she was just as good as one of the boys. Instead, she'd gotten drunk and fallen in the sack with the first commando she crossed paths with.

But what a hot commando. In her own defense, Ian McCloud was not an average, one-each commando. Plus, the two of them had narrowly avoided dying and been riding an adrenaline high. Allowances could be made in such circumstances, right?

Cut the bull, Piper. You screwed up and you know it.

The other side of her brain, the side with the red suit, horns, and a tail sighed happily. Screw, she had. And it had been fantastic.

"Morning, Piper," a deep voice rumbled under her ear. "How're you feeling? Headache? Hangover?"

She propped herself up on an elbow on top of his chest and grinned at Ian, who lounged back against the pillows. "You were trying get me drunk, you bastard."

He shrugged. "Do I look stupid? The hottest female in all of North Africa comes to my place for the night? Of course I ply her with liquid panty remover."

She ought to be appalled, but he was so sexy flashing those dimples of his at her that she couldn't possibly stay outraged for long. "You are so damned good looking," she grouched, "how am I supposed to stay mad at you?"

He ran his fingertips lazily down her spine until her breath caught and her body went limpid against his. He cajoled, "Don't be mad, honey pie. It's a big compliment. I don't normally seduce women."

"What? You seduce goats?" she quipped.

His palm smacked her rear end lightly. She stuck her tongue out at him and he smirked back at her.

"But you seduced me," she commented. "Why? And don't tell me I look like a goat."

"Wait. I thought you seduced me."

"Hah! You definitely did the plying of liquor, tempting with a warm bath, and seducing of the naked female in your tub."

"I guess that makes it your turn to seduce me."

She had to give the guy credit. He was an equal opportunity hooker-upper. The word hooker-upper made her smile, and she rubbed against him catlike. "Where's that vodka bottle?" she demanded.

"We've both got places to go and things to do today, sweetheart. Or aren't you up to the challenge of seducing me sober?"

"You did not just say that."

His eyes glinted in amusement and challenge. "What are you going to do about it, hotshot?"

"Impatient. Men are all so bloody impatient."

"When it comes to sex, hell yeah," he declared.

Laughing, she rose up over him and flung her leg across his hips. Her vision was okay, but her head still spun a little after the potent vodka last night. She wouldn't want to try a long distance, high accuracy shot with her sniper rig right about now.

Dammit. She hated not being in complete control of herself. She fought to clear her head, searching for clarity of thought. Logic. Focus.

Crap. The only thing she could focus on right now was Ian's eyes, clear and green in the filtered morning light. She sank into them unwillingly, but inevitably.

To hell with fighting. Later would be soon enough to pick up the burden of her control issues. She tore her gaze away from his mesmerizing eyes and stared down at his washboard abs.

"Nice scar," she commented, tracing a recently healed knife scar on his stomach.

"Thanks. My future brother-in-law gave that to me."

"Sounds like a good story."

One corner of his mouth turned up sardonically. "If my baby sister didn't love the guy so much, I'd gut him. But he makes her happy."

"Protective of family, are you?"

He looked startled at her observation.

She laughed. "Let me guess. You style yourself inscrutable and unreadable to all, especially women."

"Well...yeah."

"Hardly, Tonto." She sensed an argument coming on, and to distract him, drew her fingernails down his chest toward the line of dark hair disappearing between her legs. His mouth, opened to make a snappy comeback, shut abruptly.

Mission accomplished. He was officially distracted.

"I like your chest," she murmured.

“I like yours, too.” He reached for said chest, and she inhaled sharply. The man was not without weapons of his own in their private little war. Speaking of which, at long—belated, last—her survival instinct finally kicked in and her brain started functioning. A little.

What the hell was she doing sitting naked on top of this man?

She barely knew him. She would never see him again. He would break her heart and leave her in the dust without a backward glance. But dammit, he was so very addictive. If only he didn’t know it. If only she knew him.

“Tell me something about you,” she murmured. “Something personal.”

“Like what?” Thank God. He sounded a little distracted, too.

“Anything.”

“I have four brothers and a sister. They all work for the government or law enforcement agencies.”

She’d always wanted to be part of a big family. Instead, it had been just her brother, her dad, and her. Not that her old man had ever functioned as much of a father. He’d been a drill sergeant before her mother had come along, wrecked his career, and abandoned a toddler and an infant with him. He’d raised his kids like raw recruits.

Ian’s fingers played her body like a freaking violin, stroking her into a quiet frenzy.

She was not going to lose control this morning, dammit. He was *not* playing fair.

She was supposed to be in control of herself this morning! In control of this wild heat that erupted between them every time they got naked together.

Her old man always said the best defense was a good offense. Eyes narrowed, she leaned backward a little and reached down for erection jutting against her backside.

She wrung a groan from him and satisfaction filled her. Better.

One of his powerful arms wrapped around her waist and he neatly reversed their positions without separating their bodies. He was willing to allow her the temporary conceit of thinking she was in charge of their sex, but at the end of the day, he was master of all that took place in his bed. His weight and strength pinned her to the mattress, and reluctantly, she had to admit she liked it better this way.

The corded muscles of his arms, braced on either side of her head, were irresistible. She reached up with both hands to grasp his taut muscles and hung on for dear life. His eyes blazed, silently daring her to look away.

As if. She wanted to hold out, to defy him and all his overwhelming maleness, but all at once she capitulated. Why fight the pleasure? This was fantastic. Best. Sex. Ever.

She gave herself over to this crazy thing that exploded between them every time they spent two minutes alone in the same room and to the sex. How was it possible the sex just kept getting better every time?

She shattered without warning into a thousand tiny pieces—sharp, shiny little shards of pleasure that sliced her from head to toe until pleasure bled from every part of her body.

At least Ian had the good grace to look a little stunned, too. She would hate to have had her mind completely blown by what turned out to be, for him, mediocre sex.

“What the hell do you do to me?” he finally muttered.

Hah. And here she was, thinking the exact same thing.

Without warning, he pressed up and away from her and rolled out of bed in one quick, muscular move.

She felt...bereft.

Ian’s movements were sharp, almost angry, as he jerked on clothes and started throwing gear and supplies into a reinforced nylon duffel bag. She pressed up onto a surprised elbow. He looked like he was packing. In a hurry.

“Going somewhere?” she asked cautiously.

“Getting the hell out of town before one of the many bad guys out there finds me and puts a bullet in my head. If you had the sense of a flea, you’d be doing the same thing.”

Stung, she sat up and threw her feet over the side of the bed. Quickly, she retrieved her lingerie and yanked it on, followed by her clothes. Damned if she would let him get the last word and accuse her of having no sense. She twisted her hair up on top of her head and jammed her slouchy hat over it, snatched up her rifle, and paused as she reached his door.

As brusquely as she could muster past her hurt at his abrupt attitude shift, she remarked, “It’s been fun, McCloud. Don’t run into a bullet with your name on it.”

She made it downstairs and nearly a full block from his hooch before the tears came.

What an ass. He’d loved her into oblivion and then all but thrown her out of his bed. She was no more than a casual lay to him.

Well, dammit, he’d been no more than that to her, either. So there. To hell with him.

She dashed away the tears that would give away her disguise as a man and stormed back to her apartment. She was *so* done with him. Ian McCloud could rot.

“Missy McCloud?” a scratchy voice asked.

Piper started. Looked around. And spotted the blind charwoman. “Mala. I’m glad I ran into you. Here is your *melaya*.”

She fished the voluminous garment out of her backpack and hoped the woman had not been cold overnight without it. Surreptitiously, she wrapped a half-dozen of her high-calorie protein bars inside the cloth, along with the handful of local coins that had amassed at the bottom of her bag during her stay in Sudan.

“Fatima. She have message for you.” The old woman gestured with her bony, dry hand for Piper to come closer. “She send t’anks fo’ shots and food. She say white men you lookin’ fo’ be goin’ south. Ragala Village.”

“Where’s that?” Piper asked, startled.

“Beyond Talodi. Bad country, ‘dat.”

“How so?”

“Peoples die mo’ often ‘dan live when ‘dey go into ‘dat bush. You no follow. You send Mr. Ian. Yah?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll ask him to go for me.”

“You stay heah’. You be safe ‘ere in ‘de big city.”

God almighty. If Kahrtoom’s warring slums were safe, she would hate to see Mala’s idea of dangerous.

“Go on, now. Git off street. Bad men, ‘dey lookin’ for you. Stay in house for a few days, yes?”

“Yes, of course” she answered distractedly. “Bad men looking for me? Which ones?”

The charwoman cackled a little crazily, unnerving Piper more than she cared to admit. “All of ‘dem, chile. All of ‘dem. Dey’s coming for you.”

Ian slapped at a biting fly and tucked his camo-mosquito netting a little more tightly against the ground. Hard to believe he could prefer sitting on a broiling Khartoum rooftop to anyplace in the world, but sitting in sweltering African bush with no breeze, among the snakes and biting, crawling critters, was actually worse.

At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten Piper to leave Khartoum before she ran so afoul of the locals that one of them killed her. She was probably stateside by now, eating American fast food and sitting in her air-conditioned home watching pre-season football games. Lucky bitch.

Aww, who was he kidding? He was glad she was safe. He'd worried about her the whole time she was in Khartoum. That town was no place for a lady.

Doing his best to block out the physical misery of this surveillance op, he wiped sweat off the rubber cups of his binoculars for the hundredth time and put them back against his face. The house that came into focus looked wildly misplaced in the middle of the African bush.

The white, two-story, clapboard structure with broad verandas and a bright metal roof could not be more out of place in this sub-Saharan clime. It looked like a Dutch colonial homestead that had blown in on a *wahdi*, a great Saharan sandstorm, and been dropped in this little clearing by accident.

What the hell it was doing out here in the middle of nowhere was anybody's guess. Maybe a leftover of the colonial period when these lands were ruled by Europeans.

The temperature had long-since blown past 120 degrees when a cloud of dust rising from the bush obscured the house's driveway and roused him to full alertness. A visitor, maybe? Strangely, though, no vehicle pulled into view in the cleared area around the house.

He waited a couple of minutes, but nothing. And no cloud of dust announced that a car had turned around and gone back the other direction.

What the hell? He scanned the edges of the clearing carefully. Nada. Intrigued, he reached for his hearing-seeking scope and took a look.

Bingo. Warm blobs at eleven o'clock. Human-sized. Two of them. Both squatting, appearing to hunker down to wait for something or someone. He settled in to wait out this new quarry. What were they up to?

He didn't have long to wait to find out. In about ten minutes, activity erupted at the rear of the house. The back door opened and a man stepped outside into Ian's range of vision. He carried a cooler-sized container of some kind. It looked made of Styrofoam. The man opened the back of a Land Rover and stowed the cooler in the back.

Over the next few minutes, the same guy carried out two more coolers. On his way back inside the third time, he paused on the back porch and made a quick cell phone call. More importantly, he turned so Ian could see his face.

Quickly, Ian snapped pictures of the man. Middle-eastern in coloring and features. Late thirties in age, maybe. Neat. Well-groomed. Was this the Palestinian scientist he'd been tracking? The guy had the look of a scholar about him.

The man started the Land Rover. Windows rolled up. So it was air-conditioned. What was in those coolers that he was so concerned about keeping cool?

The target made another trip inside and came back out.

Ian stared, shocked. That was a kid with him. A little girl. No more than seven or eight years old if he had to guess. She was fucking carrying a doll. The man led her to the passenger side of the vehicle and helped her in. Ian photographed the whole thing, but simmering anger smoldered in his gut. It was pretty shitty of a terrorist to use a child as a cover.

Yet again, the man disappeared into the building.

Ian started as activity at the front of the house caught his attention. The blobs from the other side of the house had stepped

out of the bush and now approached the front porch. They were both carrying what looked like big gasoline containers. What the hell?

Perhaps two minutes passed.

The terrorist exited the back of the house and climbed into the Land Rover.

Shit. He was going to have to hoof it back to his Jeep to be in time to pick up the guy's Land Rover when it hit the main road. He would have to follow the guy at a distance because of the dust trails out here on the unpaved roads, but he was no amateur. No way in hell was he losing this bastard now that he finally had contact with the Palestinian.

Ian stood up, careful to keep brush between him and the driveway. He shouldered his backpack and took a step into the bush when yet another movement captured his attention.

Something—someone—was creeping onto the back stoop. Stealthily. And there was something familiar about the silhouette—

Nononononono. Curses erupted in his skull as he swung the binoculars up to his face.

God *damn* it. What was Piper doing here? His attention swung back to the Land Rover's dust retreating all too quickly down the driveway. He had to go. Now.

She disappeared into the house while he debated with himself. His job was to track the Scientist. But she needed back-up in the worst way. Two men had just snuck in the front door!

Cover her six? Chase the terrorist? No choice in the matter. He had to do his job. He spun for the bush and his vehicle.

But then he heard some sort of scuffle inside the house. He spun back around reflexively. Damn it all.

The front door opened and two Caucasian men came outside. They moved quickly, but not in alarm.

Fuck. Had they jumped Piper? Taken her out? Was that a fight he'd heard? Was she injured or dead inside the house?

He swore violently. He *had* to leave her behind!

But then something else caught his attention. A tendril of smoke curled out the front door before the men shut it behind them. They chatted casually as they jogged down the front steps and headed for the driveway. They weren't concerned about her, that was for damned sure.

The Palestinian was getting away.

Piper was inside that house.

And if he wasn't mistaken, those two men had just set the house on fire.

Fuck. Fucking fuck, fuck.

No good choice. Let a fellow American operative burn to death. Do his duty. Heart versus head.

The Special Forces code of 'Leave no man behind,' imprinted on his soul in blood, sweat, and tears, burned like acid. The McCloud creed, 'We take care of our own,' added its chorus to the urgency screaming in his head.

Swearing in a steady stream, he turned for the house and Piper. *She had better be dead, because he was going to kill her for making him let the Palestinian get away.*

He paused long enough to test the front door knob for heat—cool to the touch. Safe to go in. A small vestibule greeted him, smelling of bleach and antiseptics. A staircase disappeared upstairs to his left. He stepped into the room on his right and saw the source of the smoke. A pile of bedframes and thin mattresses were haphazardly stacked in a bonfire in the middle of the room and flames rose from the pile almost to the ceiling, which was already turning black.

Whoever had set this fire should have opened the windows to provide additional oxygen to the blaze. But far be it from him to tell an arsonist how to do his work.

He ran down the central hall to the back of the house and found an empty kitchen. Ian backtracked, checking the other rooms on the first floor quickly. Where in the hell was Piper?

He returned all the way to the front door. The fire was starting to crackle and pop as the wooden bedframes caught fire. That blaze was going to get hot fast. And then this old, dry, wood frame house was going to go up all at once.

He raced upstairs, calling Piper's name. The carpet in the room over the bonfire was smoking and threatening to burst into flames. He went room to room but saw no sign of her. Where was she?

Had those bastards knocked her out and stowed her body somewhere? He checked the closets and behind the desultory furniture, anywhere she could be lying unconscious, about to be roasted alive.

The last door in the back of the upper floor revealed the only fully furnished bedroom. Refrigerator-esque cold skittered across his skin in the dim space. A double bed took up one wall, and a low cot covered with a lavender comforter sat in the far corner underneath what must be an industrial strength air-conditioner. Even now, the thing was humming away, blasting the room with chilly air.

Good luck against the inferno to come. All across the top of the unit, small blue bottles stood in a neat row. He picked one up to have a look. The label was written in some Arabesque language he did not read. He snapped a quick photo of it on his cell phone before tossing it in a pocket on his utility vest.

He threw open the closet door and peered in just long enough to rule it out as Piper's hiding place.

Unfamiliar and altogether unpleasant, panic started to claw at his gut.

He tore back downstairs. The ceiling of the living room was on fire now, along with the curtains and exterior wall. Heat roared toward him, and the fire was getting loud.

He bolted past it one more time to the back of the house. He would've seen her go out the back door from his vantage point, and she definitely hadn't gone out the front door. She *had* to be in here, somewhere.

Where. Was. She?

He skidded to a frustrated stop in the kitchen. The first door he threw open was a pantry. The second door revealed a staircase, however. Basement.

Casting a worried glance over his shoulder at the fire quickly consuming the front of the house, he raced down the steps into the dark.

He narrowly avoided hitting his head and was forced to slow down. "Piper! Are you down here?"

"Ian? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Saving your—"

He rounded the corner and skidded to a halt in the middle of a high-tech lab set-up that looked like it belonged at a pharmaceutical firm. "What's this?" he blurted.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," she muttered over her shoulder as she fiddled with a keyboard and monitor attached to a computer tower sitting on the floor.

"Are you aware that the house is on fire?"

That made her look up. "What?"

"Burning merrily overhead as we speak. We have to get out of here, now."

"I can't go, yet. I've got to collect samples. Bag and tag them so we can figure out what was going on in here."

"Piper. The house is on *fire*."

As if to emphasize his point, a burning ember fell from the ceiling at the far end of the long lab, right about underneath where the bonfire ought to be.

"I'm sorry, Ian but I can't leave until I get samples. This is too important."

"You won't get any samples out if you don't leave with me. Now."

"Shut up and find me a plastic bag or something like that."

He stared at her in disbelief. Was she shitting him? The house was burning down around their ears and she wanted to play forensic investigator?

Swearing, he searched for a heavy object to conk her over the head with. He would knock her out and carry her from the burning building—

—He spied a cardboard box of plastic sandwich bags sitting on a shelf. Momentarily derailed from his plan, he spat, "Here are some damned bags."

"Put those dead mice in the bags. One mouse per bag. And whatever you do, don't touch the mice. You might want to hold your breath when you're in proximity to them. No telling what diseases they incubated."

He stared in disgust at the pile of little corpses she must have retrieved from the trash can next to her.

Incubated? Diseases? Jesus. What *was* this place? He glanced around and spied another row of those little blue bottles on a high shelf along with other bottles of chemical supplies.

A forearm-sized piece of wood tumbled to the floor with a loud clatter behind them. He jumped. "Gotta go," he urged in a singsong voice of impatience.

"I think I've found it...one more sec...ah hah!"

He couldn't help glancing at the computer screen she was watching intently. Numbers and long scientific words scrolled across the readout. "Just take the whole damned hard drive with you and let's *go*."

"Can't. Hard drive is in that tower over there." She pointed at a man-sized server array in the corner. Jesus. What was going on here that required so much computing power?

She plugged a thumb drive into the side of the computer terminal on the desk and grinned up at him triumphantly. "Take a quick look around while I download this data. As soon as it's done, we can get out of here."

"Assuming the kitchen's not an inferno," he replied grimly.

He took a few steps toward the far end of the lab and spied something that made him suck in a sharp breath.

"What?" Piper asked quickly.

"Don't look," he bit out. "Finish up over there." He whipped out his high-intensity flashlight and pointed it into the shadows.

"Ohmigod," Piper gasped from behind him.

Of course, she'd looked. Dammit.

He stared in raw horror at the pile of dead human bodies encased in clear plastic body bags. They weren't neatly laid out like a morgue. Some of them were curled into fetal balls, some had arms or knees sticking up inside their transparent plastic sarcophagi. Some lay in dark pools of dried blood inside their individual body bags. The flashlight caught a pair of eyes

staring back at him out of a black-skinned face. What should have been the whites of the young woman's eyes were blood red. He lurched and took a staggering step back.

That satanic death stare chilled him to the bone. He'd seen some messed up shit in his day, but this took the cake. Piper bumped into him from behind. "Are they all dead?" she asked in horror.

He bit out grimly, "If living people get put into body bags they suffocate soon enough. Those bags are meant to keep in bodily fluids and smell of decay. They're water- and air-tight."

"How did they die?" She started to move forward toward the pile of corpses.

The ceiling over the dead bodies was sagging noticeably and the smoke that had started gathering near the ceiling was seeping upward into cracks in the sagging spot at an increasing rate.

"No time to investigate. The ceiling's about to collapse, and we'll burn to death if we stay here!"

"Pictures. We need proof."

"Jesus Christ!" At this point it was more efficient to do what she said than to argue with her. Frustrated and frantic, he whipped out his cell phone and stabbed at it to bring up the camera function. He snapped a half-dozen pictures fast. "Can we go now?"

"Yeah. Sure. Cool your jets—"

The rest of her words were drowned out as the ceiling gave way in slow motion, blackened beams cracking and falling like a flaming mass of pick-up sticks. He shoved her violently behind him, then swore and threw up his arm to ward off a burning brand from above. He batted at his hair to quell any burning embers.

Inferno-esque heat poured over him. This place was going to be a no-shit oven in a few seconds.

"Up the stairs!" he shouted over the roar of the bonfire as the entire pile of flaming mattresses and bed frames collapsed through the hole.

Searing heat made the air too hot to breathe. Sleeve thrown over his mouth, he turned and ran for his life. Piper scrambled ahead of him as a rush of unbelievably hot air followed them up the makeshift chimney the stairwell had just become.

Smoke, black and blindingly thick, billowed around them. He found the handrail and clung to it for all he was worth as he raced upward in blackness blacker than night.

He burst into the kitchen and fell to his hands and knees, beneath the pall of smoke filling the room fast. Piper became visible a foot ahead of him. She was looking back over her shoulder in panic toward him.

"Where to?" she screamed over the unbelievable noise, hands outstretched and obviously disoriented. He saw her eyes were screwed shut. Must have gotten smoke in them and temporarily blinded herself.

He crawled past her fast, heading for the back door he'd seen the Palestinian use earlier. On the way by, he grabbed her hand and wrapped it around his belt. She hung on for dear life as he scooted for the door as fast as his hands and knees would carry him. The ceiling was on fire and burning crap rained down all around him, burning his scalp and back.

The top of his head banged into something hard. He felt a door panel and groped frantically for a doorknob. His fingers screamed in pain as he touched scorching hot metal. Quickly, he yanked his cuff down over his hand and opened the door.

He started to stand up to make better time—and was slammed flat by Piper throwing herself on top of him—just as a violent wave of fire rushed through the doorway barely above them.

"Backdraft!" she shouted as she rolled off him.

Jesus H. Christ. She'd just saved his life.

He scrambled on his belly across the porch and down the steps. Shit was falling off the sides of the burning building and he pushed to his feet and sprinted a hundred feet or so away from the house until the worst of the blistering heat on his back subsided.

He fell to one knee, coughing like a chain smoker.

Piper hacked and coughed beside him. Her face was soot-smudged and blistered, and tears streamed down her cheeks, striping the mess. Yet she still managed to be just about the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

He'd found her in time. And he'd pried her away from her damned investigation in the nick of time. They'd made it. They were alive.

"Well, that was fun," she gasped.

He sucked in a lungful of cool, fresh air just as a half-dozen popping noises exploded behind them. "Get down!" he ordered her urgently.

"What's happening?" Piper asked from above him. "Is the house exploding or something?"

He grabbed her arm and yanked her off her feet violently.

"Hey!" she protested as she hit the dirt beside him.

"Gunfire," he bit out, pulling out his sidearm. "Someone's shooting at us."

"Who the hell's firing at us?" she exclaimed.

He took a general position fix on the direction of the gunfire and realized it would ultimately drive them back into the burning building. Sonofabitch.

“Someone wants us to go back into that fire.”

“We can’t go back in there. We’ll die!”

No shit, Sherlock.

“Cover,” she bit out. “We need cover.”

He looked around desperately. Off to their left. A cluster of bushes with a small boulder nestled in the middle of them. “On my mark,” he bit out in her ear, “Run for that rock.”

As soon as she nodded, he ordered, “Now.”

They jumped up and ran like bats out of hell for the scant cover of the boulder. He noted that she knew to zigzag and make herself a harder target to hit. He dived behind the rock just as another volley of gunfire exploded behind them. From the direction of the driveway.

“Gotta be the white guys who went into the house after the Palestinian left,” he muttered tightly.

A distressed look crossed Piper’s face. Under her breath, she muttered, “They had better *not* be shooting at me.” Louder, pitched for him to hear, she suggested, “Maybe it’s locals who don’t appreciate foreigners poking around.”

Doubtful. Despite being on the wrong side of a violently disputed border, this place was out in the middle of nowhere.

She asked low, “How much ammo have you got?”

“Not enough for a gunfight. You?”

She pulled a pistol out of a holster in the small of her back. “Two partial clips. Call it twenty rounds.”

“How are you at stealth evasion?”

“I guess we’re about to find out,” she replied wryly.

Good point. They couldn’t sit here and get picked off like sitting ducks. He held up his fist and gave her the signal to move out.

Thank God Ian had stopped creeping around in the bush for a second. Breathing heavily, Piper tried to have a heart attack quietly, but feared she was failing.

Why had the PHP guys Ian had spotted—for surely he'd seen the same two men she'd already spotted behind them—set the house on fire? And furthermore, *why* had they stuck around to shoot at her and Ian? Had they gotten orders to make sure nobody put out the fire?

If so, *who* gave the order? And why would the Americans follow orders from anyone associated with that nightmare lab in the basement?

For all the PHP guys knew, she and Ian had been innocent passersby who'd only gone into the burning house to make sure no one was trapped inside.

Right. Because anyone innocent would happen to be strolling past a hidden lab in the middle of freaking nowhere. If one of the most dangerous countries on earth could properly be classed 'nowhere.'

She could not wait to get her thumb drive and those dead mice back to a lab and figure out what had been going on in that secret lab. Memory of bloodshot, dead eyes staring accusingly at her, nearly made her wretch. Fatima said El Noor was shipping girls with hemorrhagic fevers south. To die horribly and end up in body bags? Why?

The lab equipment in the basement gave credence to the idea that someone was researching hemorrhagic diseases. To what end? And why would the Patrick Henry Patriots give a damn?

The only possible answers she could think of frankly made her stomach want to heave.

She flashed a hand signal at Ian asking if they could talk aloud.

He shook his head in the negative. Paranoid, much? Not that she was in any position to cast stones at him for that just now. He'd saved her life for crying out loud.

She wouldn't have had any idea the house was on fire until the ceiling fell in. And knowing her luck, she would've been elbow deep in those body bags when the roof caved in on them. An involuntary shudder rippled through her. Sheesh. That had been way too close a call.

Something slithered away into the weeds no more than three feet from her nose and she lurched hard against Ian. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

She was never, ever, crawling around on her belly in the African bush again. She'd seen more gigantic, creepy bugs—and snakes—and lizards—nose-to-nose today than she ever cared to, again. Knowing Africa, most of them were wickedly venomous, too.

Her throat was parched and the back of her neck must look like boiled lobster. She stifled a cough against the inside of her elbow for the hundredth time—she was still hocking up phlegm after inhaling all that smoke.

The bottoms of Ian's boots disappeared around yet another clump of the local sawgrass that had already sliced her cheeks a half-dozen times this afternoon. She followed grimly, hesitating to imagine how it was possible to be any more miserable than this, lest she jinx herself into finding out.

Ian rose to a crouch in front of her and a sharp knife of hope stabbed through her. Please God, let this be the end of their ankle-high safari. He scanned in a 360-circle around them through his infrared goggles and gestured her to stand up beside him.

Praise the Lord and pass the potatoes.

He put his mouth on her ear to whisper, "My Jeep's just ahead. I think our shooters have left the area."

Grateful nearly to tears, she followed him behind a big clump of scrub and climbed into the passenger seat of his Jeep. She had no idea where her motorcycle was at this point. She wished it and whoever found it godspeed. Ian started the engine, but more importantly, he turned the air conditioner on full blast.

She groaned in pleasure as marginally cool air blew in her face. A little civilization went a long way after a day like today. She might run around here trying to act like one of the boys, but she liked her creature comforts as much as the next girl. He eased the vehicle forward very slowly.

“You think they may still be out there?” she asked.

“Not likely. I’m just trying not to lay down a big trail of dust and announce our presence to everyone within a mile of our position. Even if your guys have left, that doesn’t mean this area is by any means safe for us.”

“They’re not *my* guys,” she snapped a little peevishly.

“They’re your targets, right?” he asked evenly.

Too evenly. She might not know him all that well, but she knew him well enough to know that he was not a happy man at the moment. What wasn’t he telling her about the dangers out here?

“What’s wrong, Ian?”

“Care to explain why your guys hooked up with my target all of a sudden and burned down his lab for him when he was done with it?”

“The logical assumption is that they work together,” she replied reluctantly. *Please, God, let that not be true.*

Silence fell between them as Ian steered the Jeep onto a paved road and picked up speed. And it wasn’t one of those contemplating the countryside together in companionable quiet silences. This one simmered and stewed, twisting angrily throughout the vehicle, wrapping itself around Ian and lashing out at her every minute or two.

What was his trauma? She’d already asked him once what was wrong. She would be damned if she asked him again.

After maybe a half-hour of driving northward, he spoke, this voice vibrating with tightly controlled anger. “The first two times your investigation put you across my path, I thought it was chance that our respective investigations brought us together. K-Town’s not that big a place at the end of the day. But now I’m starting to think you and I may be investigating the same problem.”

“I’m following a group of American, back-to-pre-industrial-revolution separatists. How do they have anything to do with a Palestinian scientist/terrorist?”

“Answer that, and we may figure out what both of our targets are up to.”

Reluctantly, she had to agree with him. Three times, now, tracking her targets had led her straight to Ian. Either he and she were following the same terrorist trail, or the gods of fate were playing a grand joke on the two of them. And she didn’t happen to believe in fate.

“Any brilliant ideas about how we should proceed?” she asked, leaning her head back against the headrest and closing her eyes.

“That’s a hell of a question, given that I had to let my target go so I could run into that house and save your neck. Again.” He thumped both hands on the steering wheel in frustration. “I had him, dammit. I had *visual* on the bastard. I’ve been tracking him for *months*!”

There wasn’t anything she could say to that. She was grateful—beyond grateful—that he’d come into the house to let her know it was on fire. She had lost situational awareness and likely would not have realized what was happening in time to save herself.

And then, when she’d gone back up to the kitchen and that smoke had been so thick and black, she couldn’t have seen her hand even if it was touching the end of her nose. She’d had no idea she would be completely, totally blind.

It had been one of the scariest moments of her life as flames and heat and embers swirled around her and she had no idea which way was out.

Thank God Ian had been there. She didn’t want to think about what would’ve happened if he hadn’t grabbed her hand and led her to safety.

He spoke heavily. “We need to get your samples to a lab and that thumb drive to a tech expert. Let’s sincerely hope they give us a lead on how to pick up the trail of my Palestinian again. If not, I’m screwed.”

“What do you mean?” she asked in quick alarm.

He glanced over at her sourly. “I disengaged my pursuit of an international terrorist to go into that house and save you. I’ll be thrown out of the Navy on my ass, if I’m lucky, for this.”

“If you’re not lucky?”

He shrugged. “Court-martial. Jail time. Dishonorable discharge.”

“Because you saved my life?” she squeaked.

“I was specifically tasked with finding and stopping a dangerous terrorist. I chose to ignore that imperative. I disobeyed orders.”

“I’m sure the government won’t take that extreme a view of the situation—“

“I’m not a civilian. I’m a military officer. Duty, honor, country, and the whole nine yards. I was derelict in my duty. Period.”

She subsided against her seat. Well, rats. That sucked. “Is there anything I can do to help?” she offered in a small voice.

“My decision. My problem.”

His stoic attitude made her frown. “You don’t have to suffer the consequences entirely alone, you know. I’m here for you.”

“What? You’ll send me brownies in jail?” he snapped. “I didn’t take you for the sort who bakes.”

She didn’t try to talk with him anymore. Chances were the data she’d collected would be extremely valuable in understanding what exactly had been going on in that lab. She’d managed to copy what looked like the lab notes for the past few months. And to have snagged actual tissue samples, in the form of those dead mice, was a major coup. But she didn’t bother trying to explain all of that to Mr. Grumpy Pants.

Ian seemed determined to anticipate the worst. Far be it from her to correct his negativity. If he wanted to heap all the responsibility on his own shoulders, so be it. Except even as she thought that, an urge to help him, to protect him from harm, startled her.

Once they crossed the border, they would be marginally safer. Marginally being the operative word.

The road passed out of the bush and onto wide-open savannah that stretched away to the edge of forever. The sky was a gigantic dome overhead, stained with oranges, roses, and lavenders as the sun slid beyond the far horizon. This continent was so grand, it rather overwhelmed a person, sometimes. This was one of those moments when it awed her.

More importantly, this region marked their return to North Sudan. She breathed mental sigh of relief.

“God, Africa’s big,” she said in a hush. “Sometimes I forget just how big.”

The Dark Continent lived up to its name as night fell quickly. The sky faded to purple, then navy, then velvety black. She was surprised when Ian continued to leave the headlights off, however, driving only by the scant starlight starting to twinkle overhead. Must be more of his aversion to drawing attention to their presence.

“Please tell me you know this road,” she said nervously.

He looked surprised. “Oh. Yeah. I drove it all the time when I was working with...an American contractor...down on the border.”

Contractor, her foot. He’d been working with mercenaries. Probably hired to observe the informal war raging along the disputed border, or maybe to smuggle supplies and/or people one direction or the other, or maybe he’d been ordered to tip the scales in the conflict by helping one side or the other.

Guys like Ian were assigned to “watch” and “observe” but not to interfere or, heaven forbid, get caught participating in the wet work and black ops run by civilian mercenaries.

They drove for a good hour across that gigantic plain, and then the road passed into light forest interrupted by plentiful tilled fields. Ian turned on the headlights and proceeded more normally toward the north.

Abruptly, he broke the silence. “When we get back to civilization, we need to follow the money. It always comes back to that. Someone’s got to pay for the bullets, bombs and bad guys.”

“And bacteria, while we’re alliterating B’s,” she added.

One corner of his mouth turned up sardonically. He leaned toward her, and her pulse spiked like crazy in spite of her resolve to let what had happened in Khartoum stay in Khartoum. After the epic sex they’d shared, she would’ve thought she would be used to his nearness by now. But apparently not.

He reached behind her seat with his free hand and emerged with a two-liter water bottle. “It’s the only one I’ve got left, but we can share it.” If it was a peace offering, or at least a truce offering, she took it gratefully, murmuring her thanks as she lifted the bottle out of his hand.

Greedily, she guzzled her half of the bottle of tepid water and passed the rest to him. She watched, enthralled as the muscles of his throat worked with each swallow he took. There was nothing boyish about him. He was all man, muscular and in his prime.

“How old are you?” she asked.

He looked over at her startled, tossed the empty plastic bottle over his shoulder, and replied, “Thirty-four. You?”

“Twenty-five.”

“What’s a baby like you doing out in the field?”

“How old were you when you went on your first Special Ops assignment?” she demanded.

“Nineteen. But I was a SEAL and dumber than dirt. I had a team to save me from my lack of age and experience.”

She shrugged, her point made. They drove for a while more in silence, thankfully a little less tense than before. Ian followed crappy little dirt tracks generally north and east across North Sudan.

“How’d you get into this line of work?” he asked her.

“I kind of fell into it. My dad raised me and my brother by himself. He was a Marine. If you met him, you’d know how I ended up here.”

Ian made a sound of commiseration. “My old man was a Green Beret. Ex-military men can make for high intensity parents, eh?”

“That’s one way of describing it.”

“Did he teach you how to shoot?”

“Yup.”

“Hell of a teacher.”

“Thanks.” She was surprised by the compliment from him.

“What happened to your mother?” Ian followed up.

“She took off when I was a baby.”

“Were you that rotten a baby?” he asked humorously.

She snorted. “I don’t remember. But I suspect it had more to do with my father being crazy than with me.”

Oh, how she’d raged at her mother over the years for abandoning her with him. If her mother couldn’t stand being with the man, what made her think her daughter would be able to tolerate him, either?

Of course, if her mother had taken Piper with her, no telling how different her life would be. One thing she knew for sure. She wouldn’t be sitting in a Jeep with Ian now, bumping across the African bush, wearing combat boots and toting a pistol.

Would she be a girly girl? Wearing pretty clothes and make-up and doing something traditionally feminine? Although, what that feminine thing might be, she had no idea.

“Are we headed back to Khartoum?” she asked cautiously.

“I’m burned in K-town. Can’t go back there.”

As was she. Maybe more than she’d realized until today’s events. “Where to, then?”

“Djibouti. U.S. Navy operates out of there to fight pirates along the Somali coast. We can catch a hop stateside from there.”

And get a hot shower. And a decent meal. And some sleep. She couldn’t decide which one sounded more orgasmic.

They stopped for gas in a medium-sized village, punctuated by Ian muttering strict orders for her to stay in the car at all costs. What she could see of the village looked a lot like the worst slums in Khartoum.

Ian handed her a greasy paper bag and a couple more bottles of water when he got back in the Jeep, and he pulled out quickly. A half-dozen young men were just converging on the gas station when he peeled out. Good thing she hadn’t asked for a potty break.

She did ask for one once the village’s lights had retreated well behind them, though. He pulled over and stopped the engine. “Don’t go more than ten feet from the rear tire, Piper. And make sure your pistol’s in your hand while you pee.”

“Jeepers, how dangerous is this place?”

“Thugs aren’t the only problem at night. That’s African bush out there. Critters who think humans are tasty snacks abound. Make it fast.”

She had never peed half that fast in her life. Visions of lions chowing on her tender tush sent her racing for the safety of the jeep in a matter of seconds.

The paper bag turned out hold some sort of fried, falafel-like cakes made of ground grain and a bean-based paste. They were tasteless and greasy, but they eased the gnawing sensation in her stomach.

The border crossing into Eritrea, a narrow strip of a country running along the north side of the horn of Africa, was uneventful. Better to transit this relatively peaceful country than Ethiopia’s more restless regions to the south, she supposed.

Whatever documents Ian showed the border guard satisfied the guy completely. The soldier didn’t even ask to see her passport. As Ian accelerated away from the checkpoint, she asked, “How’d I get through there so easily?”

“American dollars grease palms effectively in this part of the world. I slipped a hundred-dollar bill inside my passport when I handed it to him.”

She wouldn’t have had any clue that a bribe was expected. Why didn’t somebody brief her on that back in Washington?

Ian’s comment from the night they’d met danced through her brain, not for the first time. Did her bosses *want* her to fail out here? To die? To prove that girls were not as good as boys at hostile surveillance ops? It sounded like the sort of thing her father would do. Her jaw hardened as she stared out the window at the blackness.

She fell asleep sometime during the drive and woke up with a stiff, sore neck when a car horn honked nearby. They were in a big city, albeit mostly deserted at whatever late hour this was. She surreptitiously wiped a little drool from the corner of her mouth and prayed she hadn’t snored while she was out.

“You will need to show your passport at the next checkpoint,” Ian commented as he slowed and turned into a heavily fortified driveway leading to some sort of sprawling, fenced industrial area.

The guard, in civilian clothes, was American with a thick southern drawl. He dropped ma’ams and sirs in every sentence and stood ramrod straight while he inspected their passports. If that guy wasn’t military or recently retired from the military, she was a monkey’s uncle.

Whatever this compound was, it closely resembled a military base, complete with temporary quarters along the lines of a very clean, very sparsely furnished hotel. Before long, She and Ian each had a room assigned to them. She’d kind of hoped they would stay together. She really liked sleeping with him—or not sleeping as the case might be.

“I’m going to try and scare us up some food,” Ian announced. “I’ll stop by your room in a while. You wanna take a shower?”

The mere thought of a hot shower made her shudder in delight. She hadn’t had a real shower in weeks. Even the bath at

Ian's place, although heavenly, hadn't really steamed her clean all the way to the bottoms of her pores. "You have no idea," she breathed.

He grinned and left the building while she made a beeline for her room. She stripped and climbed under the hottest shower the building's water heaters could deliver up.

It was even better than she'd anticipated. It pounded out the soreness from her muscles and finally eliminated the gritty feeling she'd had ever since she hit the ground in Sudan last month. God, she hadn't thought she would ever feel clean again.

She wrapped herself in a bath towel, turbaned her hair in another towel, and headed out to the bedroom. A white plastic grocery bag stood on the lone table. He'd broken into her room to deliver her food but hadn't stuck around to join her in the shower? Bummer.

Frowning, she peeked into the bag. A couple of big water bottles, a box of snack crackers, some jerky sticks, a can of children's pasta, and a pouch of dried apples were inside. And a bottle of after-sun lotion. Aww, he'd noticed her sunburn. God bless Ian.

She plunked down on the bed and picked up the TV remote. Lord, she'd missed electronics. She pointed the device at the TV and sighed in contentment as a 24-hour weather channel in English came on. It would be lovely to sit here and watch repeats of the forecast over and over for the next year or so.

She snacked on the food, downed the water, and finally declared herself human once more. Along with hydration and nourishment came alertness, and her thoughts turned back to the case. What was up with those dead mice? Would they hold the key to the research being conducted at the secret lab?

She headed for her backpack to pull out the plastic bags and refrigerate the tiny corpses. She rooted around in her stuff but didn't spot the bags. She tried the outer pouch. Huh. Not there. Frowning, she dumped the entire contents of her pack on her bed. A whole bunch of gear scattered across the bedspread, but no dead mice in bags. They were kind of hard to miss, after all.

What the heck? She'd tucked them in the pack herself. Had they fallen out somewhere in their mad dash and hours of crawling around? She backtracked in her mind. No, she had zipped the main pouch before they'd fled the fire. And this was the first time since that she'd opened the thing.

At least she still had the thumb drive. She reached into the side pocket where she'd stowed it and froze, her hand buried inside the *empty* pocket. What the *hell*? Surely, she hadn't lost both of the key pieces of evidence from the lab—

Her gaze snapped to the grocery bag of food. Ian. He'd been in her room while she was in the shower. Had he *stolen* her evidence?

In disbelief, she searched her room from top to bottom, and after nearly ten minutes with no sign of dead rodents or any thumb drives, she could only conclude that the bastard had, in fact, stolen every bit of intel they'd brought out of the secret lab.

Fury coursed through her. She was going to *kill* him.

She should have *known* something as up when all of a sudden he got over being mad at her in the car and had waxed all chatty with her. He must have plotted this theft hours ago, the rat!

She yanked on her filthy clothes, not even caring as grit and sand grated against her freshly clean skin. She stomped into her combat boots and didn't bother to lace them before storming out of her room and back to the front desk.

"May I help you, Miss?" a young man with bright eyes and high-and-tight hair worthy of a marine recruit asked.

"I need Ian McCloud's room number," she demanded.

"We don't have an Ian McCloud staying here, ma'am."

She took a closer look at the clerk. He sure as hell looked like the kid who'd checked her in. "You did check me in earlier, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. At oh-one-oh-four hours."

"The guy with me. What room is he in?"

"What guy, ma'am?"

She stared at the kid's stone-faced expression. "Very funny. You two have had your joke. I have to talk to him right now. He took something from me and I want it back."

"I don't know who you're talking about, ma'am."

She planted her palms on the counter and leaned across it aggressively. She spoke low, her voice vibrating with fury. "Whatever he paid you, I'll double it. Tell me where to find him, or else I swear I'll bang on every door in this building until I find him."

"I promise, ma'am. He's not here!"

"Hah. So you admit you know who I'm talking about. Where is he? I'm a CIA field officer. Don't make me pull rank on you and call in my superiors. They're some severely heavy hitters."

She didn't technically work for the CIA, but the aid organization she did work for, Doctors Unlimited, fed data to the CIA and took requests from the agency as to where to send their medical "observers". And right now, she was too pissed off to split hairs.

The kid's stonewalling wavered. "He's not here, ma'am. He left about five minutes after you checked in."

“Where did he go?”

A shrug. “I don’t know. But he left with all his gear in a big hurry.”

Her jaw dropped. He’d gone? As in totally gone? Abandoned her here, alone? Her mouth snapped shut. Murder exploded in her heart. She was going to find him, and then shove the mice down his throat and the thumb drive up his ass.

“Did he give you any idea where he was going?”

“No, ma’am. He did drive away in his vehicle, however.”

“I need a phone. And the number for the front gate’s guard shack.” The young man was eager to help her, and a quick call confirmed that Ian had left the compound nearly an hour before, destination unknown.

Crud. He could be headed anywhere by now. Was he even who he said he was? Or had he played her for a colossal fool all along? Surely, he didn’t work for the same terrorists who’d paid the Scientist or and were doing business with the PHP guys.

Horror flowed through her.

“I need an overseas phone line,” she announced. “Where can I get one?”

“Now?” the kid blurted.

“Right now.”

“At this time of night, you’ll need the Command Post.” He gave her directions and she stomped out of the building on foot.

It was evening back in the States. A secretary took her call with a melodious, “Good morning, this is Doctors Unlimited. How may I direct your call?”

“I need to speak with André Fortinay. This is Piper Roth.”

“Oh, hi, Piper. How’s Africa?” the woman responded.

“Hot. And getting hotter by the second.”

The receptionist must have heard the tension in her voice because she said quickly, “Let me put you through to his cell phone Just a sec, sweetie.”

“Hello, Miss Roth. What can I do for you?” Her boss, the head of Doctors Unlimited, was originally from France and a faint hint of his Parisian roots lingered in his vowels.

“I need you to run down a guy named Ian McCloud. Find out who he works for. He claims to be military intelligence.”

“I have no need to run him down. He is Katie’s McCloud’s brother, and he is, indeed, with Naval Intelligence.”

Of course. McCloud. She should have associated the name with her colleague, Katie McCloud, at Doctors Unlimited. Katie was a nurse and worked exclusively with one of the organization’s doctors: a genius of a guy named Alex Peters.

“Assuming the man calling himself McCloud is actually the real Ian McCloud,” André commented.

Good point. “I don’t have a picture of my McCloud,” she admitted. “He’s tall. About six-foot-two. Built like an athlete. Brown hair sun bleached almost blond. Hazel eyes. Good looking guy.”

“That sounds like Ian.”

“How about you send me a picture of the real Ian McCloud?”

“Let me give his sister a call. I’m sure she has one she could send me.”

“Thanks.”

“How’s the rest of your project going? Immunizing lots of kids?”

“It’s an uphill battle to convince the religious conservatives to let me do it, but I’m making progress. The local women have turned out to be surprisingly supportive.”

“Keep plugging away. It’s important work you’re doing.”

Which was to say, she still was a go to track down the PHP guys and find out what they were up to. Which meant getting back her freaking evidence. She was grateful for the lack of a secure phone connection so she couldn’t confess to André what a screw-up she’d turned out to be on her first op to an international hot spot.

Please God, let Ian be the real McCloud. She was so hosed if he wasn’t. Not to mention, her shot at figuring out what the PHP guys were up to would be lost.

Piper waited impatiently for the picture of McCloud to come through on her email, nearly a full hour of nail-biting nerves. At long last, her phone dinged an incoming message. *Please be him.* She hit the mail button and Ian’s face, smiling and more gorgeous than ought to be legal leaped onto her screen. It was him, all right.

Her fury roared back full force. Lt. Commander Ian McCloud, U.S. Naval intelligence, had stolen her evidence. He was *totally* a dead man.

Ian rolled over as his phone buzzed him reluctantly awake. God, it felt good to be home in his own bed. The traffic sounds of Washington D.C. outside his window soothed him like nothing else. They were sounds of America. Of safety. Of beer and pizza and football—played with an oblong leather ball, thank you very much.

“Yeah?” he mumbled sleepily into the receiver. Christ. How long had he been out? Jet lag usually wasn’t bad heading from east to west, but the non-stop flight home from Djibouti to D.C. had kicked his ass.

“Hey, M&M. Rise and shine. The Old Man wants to see you in his office. Now.”

M&M. His SEAL handle and unofficial nickname among his old buddies. And the “Old Man” was the moniker reserved for unit commanders. In his case, that was the admiral in charge of his intelligence unit. He was abruptly wide awake.

“Any idea why the admiral wants to see me?” he asked. There were no secrets in the military. Biggest gossip mill on the planet was a military unit.

“Word has it he’s pretty unhappy you lost your target.”

An ass-reaming awaited him, then. He sighed. “I’ll be in as soon as I can drag myself out of bed and get dressed.”

“Oh, and we’re getting the preliminary data off your flash drive. The brass are shitting cows as we speak.”

Someday, he’d love to see an admiral actually squat down and expel a calf from his or her body. “Good to know the intel was worth it.” He ran a hand over his face. “I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Make it a half-hour. After the Old Man is done with you, everyone, and I mean *everyone*, wants to talk to you.”

Great. An ass-reaming followed by a tactical, nuclear brain-picking. Debriefings from desk-jockey, intel analysts with no field experience made him flat crazy.

He rolled out of bed and forced himself to race through showering, shaving, and dressing. He picked a freshly dry-cleaned and pressed pair of khakis and black polo shirt. He supposed he could dig out an actual uniform and button himself into it, but civvies were an authorized uniform for him, and they’d fucking woke him up on his first day home. A day he was supposed to have off to rest and recuperate.

He drove downtown, found a parking spot—a miracle on a work day in D.C.—and jogged to the unmarked office building that housed his classified unit. He paused to take a deep breath, reinforcing his poker face, before stepping into the admiral’s, office.

The butt chewing went about like he expected. His boss was rip-snorting mad that Ian had lost the Scientist. The admiral understood that a fellow American intel operative had been inside a burning house, but apparently Ian should’ve let her die and kept eyes on the Scientist.

Intellectually, Ian got it. But something deep in his gut rebelled at the notion of letting Piper die, no matter that it would’ve been in the line of duty. A quiet little alarm bell started to ring in the back of his mind. Since when did he choose a girl over the mission?

He *was* the job. Always. He never did long-term relationships. At least, not the kind with real emotions.

What the hell had Piper done to him?

He had no time to consider it further. The shouting admiral in front of him effectively distracted him.

His boss finished the mother of all ass chewings with, “At least you brought out actionable intel.” The way the admiral said it made it clear that the evidence Ian had brought out of the burning house was the *only* thing that had saved his career from being flushed down the toilet.

“Are we clear on what’s expected of you in the future, Commander McCloud?”

“Yes, sir. Crystal clear.”

“All right, then. You’re due in the conference room for debriefing in ten minutes. Get down there and help them find the

Scientist that you lost.”

Translation: fix the mess you made...or else.

Message received, loud and clear. Disgusted with himself for screwing up so royally, and furthermore for letting a woman mess him up so completely, Ian stepped into a big conference room decked out with the latest electronic bells and whistles. It was tucked into an innocuous office amid all the other innocuous offices in the building.

He looked around at the assembled group of people and allowed himself a moment of being impressed. Top analysts from Naval Intelligence, plus hot thinkers from DIA, CIA, NSA, and a couple of other alphabet agencies were here. Wow. They’d called in the bug guns on this one. What had been on that thumb drive, anyway?

Guess Piper hadn’t been nuts, after all, to insist on waiting for the data to load before they bugged out of that burning building. He might’ve felt bad about lifting the evidence from her room back in Djibouti, except a) she owed him one after nearly destroying his career with her stunt, b) she wasn’t read in on the Scientist, and c) he didn’t have permission to brief her on who the guy was and what he was potentially up to.

For all he knew, she barely had the minimum security clearance to be in Sudan. She was technically a one-each aid worker only qualified to administer immunizations and vitamin shots. It took a hell of a lot higher clearance than some glorified grain-passer had to be privy to the terrorist shit he was trying to track and stop.

“Commander McCloud, thank you for joining us.” His boss’s boss, an Army general sporting a bunch of stars on his shoulders, continued pleasantly from the head of the long conference table, “We’d like to discuss the information you brought to us.” The general gestured at a chair partway down the table.

Everyone looked at him expectantly as he sank into the indicated chair, and he had no idea what they were waiting for him to say. He muttered, “Any chance someone around here can produce a cup of coffee for me?”

In about ten seconds, an assistant to someone at the table set a steaming mug of black, caffeine alertness in front of him.

He sipped it appreciatively. The tiny cups of espresso-on-steroids they drank in North Africa packed a punch but got old after a while. He looked up. Everyone was still staring at him expectantly.

“What, umm, exactly, was on the thumb drive?” he ventured to ask.

One of the analysts answered, “Scientific data. The research notes of a brilliant mind, detailing the development of an engineered virus.”

A flash in his head of dead girls piled in body bags sent a wave of nausea coursing through him. Jesus. He shouldn’t drink coffee on an empty stomach. He reached for one of the stale donuts on a platter in front of him.

The entire wall at the end of the room lit up with what looked like lines of computer code. They might as well be in Latin for all he understood them. He would take the analysts at their word that those were the Scientist’s research notes.

“Where exactly did you find this stuff?” a youngish man asked from the other end of the table. “How recent is it?”

“Miss Roth and I found it—“ he checked his watch and did the math in his head, “forty-six hours ago in a basement lab in South Sudan. I witnessed a man I believe to be the Scientist and a little girl departing the house in question. They appeared to have packed bags and be leaving on a trip of some kind. And given that the house burned down shortly after his departure, I conclude that they did not intend to return.”

The youngish guy swore. “The Scientist could be anywhere by now. You should have gotten this information back to us faster.”

“So sorry,” Ian retorted sarcastically. “I was busy not burning to death, avoiding being shot by gunmen, and getting across the Sudan border zone alive. Silly me for not stopping the whole evading death thing long enough to fire off the files to you experts.”

The civilian analyst glared and Ian glared back. *CIA shithead.*

The general broke up the glaring match smoothly. “Tell us anything you can about this lab you found and your sighting of the Scientist.”

“I got a tip that the guy I’d been looking for had headed south out of K-town.” He glanced down the table at the CIA twink and added in a tone as dry as dust, “That’s short for Khartoum.”

The guy rolled his eyes and Ian allowed himself a tight smile before continuing, “My informant gave me a description of where to find the Scientist and his patients.”

“Who was your informant?” one of the military guys asked. The man held a pen posed over a pad of paper preparatory to taking methodical notes. Ian had been debriefed by him before. The man would question him into the ground and chase down every last detail Ian could dredge out of his memory. The guy was as boring as hell, but a great debriefer.

Belatedly, Ian answered, “A local told me where to find the Scientist. Named Mala. Her information always was good.”

The CIA boy analyst interjected impatiently, “What was the condition of the Scientist’s patients? Did you examine any of them in person?”

“They were in a pile of body bags in the basement. I did not examine them, but in my completely amateur estimation, they were fucking dead.”

“Ian,” The Army general intervened. “This thing is highly time sensitive. The information you brought us indicates that the

Scientist has completed development of a potentially lethal virus appropriate for a biological attack. We need to figure out if he finished his work and what his next move will be if he did. We thought it would be faster if all the involved agencies debriefed you together. If you could start at the beginning and tell us everything, that would expedite matters.”

“Yes, sir.” He set aside his irritation and walked them all through his observation mission in Sudan. He left out the juicier details of his encounters with Piper, of course.

The group interrupted with frequent questions, and he schooled himself to patience as they wrung him out like a wet washcloth for every bit of intel he could produce.

Ian was surprised after he’d made a casual mention of Piper’s courage and outstanding marksmanship, though, when a guy with a French accent down the table claimed her as his employee.

So. She did work for Doctors Unlimited, for real. Good to know. His baby sister and her fiancé worked for that bunch, too. From them, Ian knew it to be a CIA front. Although not all of the D.U. employees were on the CIA payroll or even trained by the CIA. Often, D.U.’s regular aid workers passively gathered intel that the organization’s director passed quietly to the CIA.

But, given the way Piper could handle a rifle and the explosiveness of the targets she’d been tracking, he would bet she was one of the workers in the know about Doctors Unlimited’s CIA connections.

When he got to the part about photographing the bodies, he pulled out his cell phone. “That reminds me. Piper had me take pictures of them with my cell phone. They won’t be high quality, but maybe you guys can pull something useful from them.” He passed his phone to a tech who scuttled forward to take it and left the room quickly.

Finally, he wound down and the rapid-fire questions ceased. His voice was hoarse and his brain exhausted. He’d been through some grueling debriefs in his day, but this one had been a bitch. Everyone was so damned tense that he didn’t need them to spell out just how dangerous this virus was.

The fact that he’d seen the Scientist load three big coolers in his vehicle made it a no-brainer to conclude the guy had not only perfected his virus but created a lot of it. A lethal biological weapon was apparently floating around, somewhere, just waiting to be loosed on some unsuspecting population.

While they waited for the photographs to be recovered, enhanced, and printed, the general filled him in a little. “Until last year’s big Ebola outbreak, previous outbreaks have usually been confined to relatively small populations and tend to cluster in small, isolated villages. Less than forty deaths from the disease at a time have been the norm. This matters because the outbreak pattern has given the Ebola virus very few opportunities to mutate.” The general paused to see that Ian was following.

He nodded, and the man continued, “But with this latest outbreak, thousands of cases of the disease gave the virus plenty of opportunity to mutate.”

Ian leaned forward, alarmed. “Did the Scientist’s notes say how it changed?”

The Army man nodded grimly. “He found a strain of Ebola that had evolved enough for him to cross-breed it with another hemorrhagic virus, Lassa Fever.”

“Why cross it with something else? Isn’t Lassa a lot less dangerous than Ebola? If the guy’s looking to make a weapon, why go down in lethality and not up?”

One of the analysts down the table fielded Ian’s question. “From his notes, it appears the Scientist was able to graft all the lethality of Ebola onto a hybrid virus along with all the spread vectors of Lassa.”

Ian opened his mouth to ask what that meant, but the tech who’d taken his phone slipped back into the room just then. The guy said without having to be asked, “We were able to enhance the images. Not only did we get the bodies, but the other images you shot, the ones of the Scientist, came out very nicely. We pulled a usable face to run through the facial recognition software.” He paused dramatically for a moment, then announced, “We got an I.D. We’ve got the Scientist.”

A familiar face flashed up on the jumbo screen, and Ian confirmed, “That’s the guy I saw moving the coolers.”

The tech continued, “Name’s Yusef Abahdi. Palestinian expat. Wife was killed a little over a year ago in a bus explosion in the West Bank. Abahdi left Israel with his young daughter soon afterward and dropped off the grid. Until this photograph two days ago.”

An analyst he didn’t know, an attractive woman down the table, piped up. “Tell us more about the child, Mr. McCloud.”

Ian frowned. “Scrawny little thing. Six or seven, maybe. Slept in a cot in her father’s room based on the evidence I saw. Of course, that bedroom had the only air-conditioner upstairs. They were undoubtedly sharing it. Abahdi seemed affectionate with her. Handled her gently when he put her in the vehicle. Buckled her seatbelt for her. Assuming she’s his kid, I’d say he’s a loving father.”

A tech, still staring at the laptop he’d just been typing at furiously, supplied, “Her name is Salima. She’s his daughter with his dead wife. Just turned eight years old.”

“Have we picked up a trail on him?” the general asked the typer.

“Not yet, sir.”

Ian snorted mentally. An optimistic answer. The tech was assuming it was only a matter of time until they found him. In his experience, guys as smart as this Abahdi character weren’t that easy to find if they didn’t want to be. Case in point, Osama bin Laden. It took ten years to find that bastard. If Ian were king, he would follow the money trail to find the Scientist.

The CIA shithead spoke up again. “Our operative is back in town and has given us her report.”

A sick, sinking certainty that the guy was talking about Piper lodged in his gut. He winced. He’d hoped to avoid seeing her again until she had some time to cool off. She was going to be right tweaked that he’d swiped her evidence. If she was already back in town, she would undoubtedly be fired up to find him and confront him over his liberation of her collected evidence.

He might feel guiltier about the theft if she hadn’t hosed his career by dashing into that burning house, or if he hadn’t just endured a hardcore ass-chewing from his boss over choosing her instead of the Scientist.

But hey, during this debrief he’d given her credit for collecting the evidence and for insisting on staying inside a burning building until she got what she needed. She had come out of the debrief smelling like a rose, compliments of him. Not that she would see it that way, knowing her.

The shithead continued, “She has already been debriefed in house and as soon as her report is compiled, we’ll share it with all of you.”

Which would be when, exactly? Now was not the moment for a turf war. A serious terrorist threat was in the offing. Even assuming some of Piper’s PHP guys and his Scientist were working together, nobody had any idea where to find any of them.

Ian looked over at the general. “Have you got marching orders for me, sir?”

“We’d like you to continue working on the Scientist. You’ve gotten closer to him than anyone else. Seen him for yourself. The CIA would like to put a contractor on it with you. The two of you will work as a team.”

He frowned. Not a full-blown CIA officer? This seemed like too important a mission to entrust to a civilian contractor. Ever since the massive information leaks by civilians a few years previously, contractors had been heavily looked down upon in the intelligence community.

It wasn’t unheard of for the various agencies within intelligence family to run joint ops—after 9/11, everyone had learned to share their toys and play nicely with the other children in the U.S. counter-terrorism sandbox—but to bring in a civilian?

He looked over at the army general questioningly, and that entire end of the table rolled its collective eyes. The score became clear. A civilian contractor was being forced upon the military intelligence establishment for some political reason or another. Maybe a turf war in Congress, or someone insisting on a pet Congressional aide get to play spy for a few weeks.

This was going to be a goat rope, in other words. He was stuck escorting around the amateur and praying like hell the guy didn’t screw up a vitally important investigation. He appreciated the silent nod to his skill that his bosses thought he could still do the job with a civilian in tow. But Christ, this was way too important an op to turn into a show-and-tell mission.

“Is there any way we can dodge this civilian adjunct?” he asked in resignation. “Classify the mission at a higher level or deem it too time critical to take the time to bring a contractor up to speed or something?”

“Sorry, Ian,” the general rumbled. “You’re stuck with a partner.”

A partner? “I’ll be in charge, though. Right?” he asked in alarm.

“Yeah, sure. No problem,” the general replied soothingly. Too goddamned soothingly. What the hell was going on?

“If one of you could fetch the contractor?” the general murmured to the phalanx of flunkies lining the sides of the room.

A door opened and he looked up curiously to see who they’d stuck him with.

He stared.

And swore.

Piper.

No. No way. He was not working with her on a mission he now knew to be of vital national security import. He’d already been forced to let a potentially deadly international terrorist slip through his grasp because she was too gung ho—or just plain stupid—to stay out of a burning building.

“I’m not working with her!” he blurted at the exact same moment she blurted, “I’m not working with him!”

“What seems to be the problem?” The general asked mildly, while looking back and forth between the two of them warningly.

Ian closed his eyes for a long moment. He damn well couldn’t tell the big boss the truth—that he couldn’t keep his hands off her and his mind on work with her anywhere close to him.

He sighed. Took a deep breath, and said heavily, “There’s no problem. I just didn’t expect to see her here. She surprised me. That’s all.”

“Uhh, yes. That’s all,” Piper chimed in. “It’s an unexpected...surprise... to see Agent McCloud here.”

None of the people in the conference room had gotten there by being dimwitted. The collective group looked back and forth between him and Piper suspiciously. He pasted a fake smile on his face and pointed it in her general direction. Thankfully, she caught the hint and returned a plastic, pleasant expression.

For the first time since she’d stepped into the room, he really looked at her. Wow. He’d never seen her look remotely like this. Gone were the combat boots, dusty fatigue pants, utility belt, and assault weapon. She wore a tight skirt and a white silk blouse that hugged her curves until a man had to sweat a little.

And then he caught sight of those sheer black hose with a retro seam up the back and high-heeled, fuck-me shoes with sassy red soles. A definite urge to mop his brow came over him.

Jesus. She looked like a woman. A confident, sexy, all-woman one. The kind of female he'd steer *way* wide of in a bar. He wouldn't exactly call himself intimidated by women like her—they just weren't his type.

She didn't look the least bit pliable or easy to manage. Frankly, she looked like hell on heels. It didn't help matters that she was currently glaring at him as if she was contemplating shoving her hand down his pants, grabbing his testicles, and looping them over his ears. Right here, right now.

Huh. He missed the girl with the assault rifle. He knew where he stood with that woman. But this one? She was a mystery to him.

Piper froze as she locked stares with Ian. He was here ahead of her? Basking in the credit for *her* intel, no doubt. *Bastard*.

She took one aggressive step forward before André Fortinay boomed, "There she is. The lady who will be assisting you in finding and stopping the Scientist. I promise, she will pull her weight. She has a master's degree in biochemistry and worked at the Centers for Disease Control before she came to work for us. She knows the handling protocols if you encounter live virus samples."

Her gaze hardened into a killer glare aimed at Ian. She was supposed to assist the jerk who'd screwed her in bed and then screwed her career? *Oh, hell to the no*.

She said firmly, "I would prefer to be the lead agent and have Mr. McCloud assist me. The nature of the materials we're tracking make my expertise crucial to the decision-making process." *Hah. Take that*.

Ian replied evenly, "Given the dangerous nature of the mission to date, I would suggest that my operational experience is paramount and I should be team lead."

Piper's jaw tightened until it hurt. Her fingernails positively ached to gouge his eyeballs out. Slowly and painfully.

The Army general interrupted their burgeoning argument. "This will be a joint op. Mutual cooperation, you two. Got it? This Scientist potentially has enough of the live virus to wipe out a major city. We're talking tens or hundreds of thousands of deaths, here. I need you both to share your toys, play nicely together, and figure out what his target is. Find him and stop him by any means necessary. Understood?"

Chastened, Piper nodded respectfully at the general and those impressive racks of stars on his shoulders. Ian looked grouchy but also nodded.

"All right then," The general said briskly. "If we're finished here, we'll let you two get to work while we prepare a flash briefing for the National Security Council."

Piper turned on her heel and marched out of the briefing room. She wasn't about to scream and throw pencils at Ian McCloud in front of her boss and the assembled heads of the whole damned intelligence community—the very men she was determined to impress with the ability of women to play with the big boys.

"Did you drive here?" Ian's voice muttered close to her ear, making her jump.

"I took a cab," she bit out, vividly aware of the discreet surveillance cameras tucked close to the ceiling of the hallway and the wagging ears of the analysts adjourning from the conference room behind them.

She jumped again as a familiar hand landed lightly in the small of her back. Dammit, her pulse still leaped at the contact. And there went a shiver down her traitorous spine. Her body kept betraying her by reacting to Ian as if it didn't know he was an ass who'd tried to torpedo her career, and now would have a new and improved opportunity to screw her over.

She stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. It had the happy side effect of knocking his hand off her back and getting his stupid mouth away from her rebellious ear.

She spoke low, for his ears alone, a smile pasted on her face as she snarled, "You listen, and listen good, Ian McCloud. I'm going to complete this mission and *by God get credit for it*, and nothing you can do is going to stop me. I don't like you, and I don't like working with you. But I'm a freaking professional, and I'm going to do my job in spite of you. As soon as this op is over, you and all your smoldering sex appeal can go straight to hell."

With a furtive glance up and down the hall, he grabbed her upper arm and dragged her to an elevator bank. He gritted out under his breath, "You can tear my head off to your heart's content as soon as we get out of here. But until we're in my car, for the sake of both our careers, put a lid on it."

He had gall to order her around? Her ire climbed a notch higher. The elevator door slid closed, confining them in close quarters. She opened her mouth to really let him have it just as he waved up at the ceiling.

Instead of ripping him a new one, she blurted, "What are you doing?"

"Waving at the surveillance guys. Head of security for this building's an old teammate of mine."

There was surveillance in the elevators, too? Her balloon of rage deflated with an almost audible squeal of escaping air. No wonder he didn't want her ripping him a new one until they reached his car.

Rats. She'd really been looking forward to letting him have it. She glanced up at the inobtrusive black glass bubble in the corner of the ceiling and smiled wanly.

Ian led her into an underground parking garage and to a pick-up truck in a numbered slot.

“You have your own parking spot in a Congressional parking garage?” she asked in surprise.

“It pays to have friends in high places.”

Her stare narrowed. This was exactly the good ole’ boy network she was out to bust. Or bust into, if she was brutally honest with herself.

Ian surprised her by unlocking her door for her and helping her into the cab of his truck in an old school act of courtesy. Contrite over stealing her evidence, mayhap? Or was there surveillance in the parking garage she didn’t know about?

“You look fantastic today, Piper. I knew you’d clean up great, but even I didn’t imagine you’d look this spectacular. You look like a cover model.”

Well, hell. There went another little piece of her irritation, bleeding away with his sincerely delivered compliment.

No, wait, dammit. She was *furious* with him. He didn’t get off this easy. She didn’t forgive him for stealing her evidence, and she didn’t forgive him for ditching her in Djibouti.

She also didn’t forgive him for being able to turn his back on her and walk away from her so easily either—stop. Rewind. Strike that from her list of grievances. What they’d had between them in Africa had been serial hooking up between strangers. Noth. Ing. More.

Big. Fat. Liar.

Aww, crap. This was not good. She was *not* still carrying a torch for this jerk. It wasn’t possible. Not after what he’d done to her. She was not that freaking needy, thank you very much. Except a little whimper way down deep inside her proclaimed her exactly that needy.

The internal argument between her head and her heart raged unabated as he guided the truck west through the downtown area toward the suburbs. He was winding into northwest D.C. along choked surface streets before she finally exhausted her anger enough to ask tiredly, “How could you steal that stuff from my room?”

“I didn’t steal it. Well, technically I did, but I took it because I had a last-minute opportunity to jump on a cargo plane that was about to leave for the States. You were exhausted and needed sleep, and I felt okay to keep going. It was nothing personal. I just got the time-sensitive evidence back here faster than you could. I gave you full credit for collecting it during the debrief.”

“I could’ve gotten on that plane, too.”

“It was a Navy cargo plane. You’re a civilian. I’m Navy and could get thrown on the crew manifest as a supplemental security guy. You would’ve had to go through a pile of paperwork and get on the manifest as a passenger, and the bird was about to start engines. There was no time to process you.”

His unassailable logic perversely annoyed her. Did he have to be so damned reasonable and have a perfect rebuttal for every accusation she threw at him? “You still should have told me.”

They were stopped at a red light, and he had the grace to look genuinely regretful as he glanced over at her. “You’re right. I should have. I’m sorry.”

Dammit, he even apologized well!

Frustrated all to pieces, she searched for and found a kernel of suspicion in her gut that he was playing on her emotions. Hell, playing her. He was an ex-SEAL, after all. That bunch was traditionally known to dislike the idea of equality for women in the Special Forces field.

She subsided against the seat, thinking hard. She reviewed their interactions from the time they’d met, looking for signs that Ian thought she didn’t belong in the field with him. Examples were abundant, now that she stopped to think about it. The way he kept charging to her rescue over and over was proof enough. As if she couldn’t take care of herself and needed a big, strong man to barge in and haul her out of danger. She *could* take care of herself, damn it.

He guided the truck into the upscale neighborhood surrounding embassy row as if he had a destination in mind. “Where are we going?” she finally asked.

“To see a hacker.”

“A computer hacker? Why?”

“All we’ve got right now is a money trail. Since I had to stick around the Scientist’s house to pull you out of the fire instead of following him, I lost his physical trail.”

There it was. The subtle dig about having to save her. Was he even aware he was doing it? “You didn’t have to come into that house after me. I could’ve gotten out on my own.”

“Oh yeah? How long would it have taken you to figure out the house was burning down over your head? We barely made it out alive as it was, and only because I dragged you out of there against your will.”

“When that far section of the basement ceiling collapsed, I would’ve caught on pretty fast.”

“You didn’t want to leave even after that happened. If I hadn’t been there and forced you to leave, you would’ve stuck around too long in that basement collecting evidence. And when you got upstairs, you didn’t know which way to go to get out. Face it. I saved you. You and your evidence would have burned up without me.”

Yup, she had been right to suspect his motives. He didn’t like women doing his job. Well, that was just tough. Eyes

narrowed and jaw tight, she asked, “Who’s the hacker?”

“We’re here. Come on. I’ll introduce you.”

They’d parked behind one of many multi-story brick row houses. In this part of town, these big old structures had mostly been converted to condos. They stepped inside a building, and sure enough, a lobby and elevator waited inside.

Ian punched a number code into the pad in the elevator, and it lurched into motion. He must know this hacker pretty well to have the elevator code to the guy’s place. Maybe the hacker was a woman. That would explain the stud muffin ex-SEAL having the code.

Damn him! Now he had her jealous over some random woman he’d slept with! He’d gotten way inside her head without her even noticing. *Begone from my mind, Ian McCloud.*

God. If only it was that easy to quit thinking about him. Or to quit craving sex with him.

The elevator door opened at the top floor and Ian knocked on the lone, snazzy stainless steel door that occupied this smaller lobby. Penthouse, then. The door buzzed and opened, and a petite blond flew through it, launching herself at Ian with a squeal of delight.

He *had* brought her to see one of his other conquests. Seriously? A knife of...something painful...twisted in her gut and she pasted on a polite smile out of long habit.

The blond finally unwrapped herself from around Ian enough for her feet to touch the ground.

Piper was staggered to see the change in him. Genuine happiness lit his face and...crap...love shone in his eyes. He *loved* this woman.

The knife completed gutting her and she felt her heart and entrails spilling out onto the ground as she stood there. Was he effing *married*? Her brain exploded into swearing and mental hair tearing. Surely, he wouldn’t have the gall to bring her to meet his goddamned wife—

“Piper, this is Katie. My baby sister.”

Sister. Oh holy fuck. His *sister*.

Thank God. She was actually hyperventilating a little. Piper shook herself mentally and took a belated step forward, holding out a hand to Ian’s sister. “Ian’s talked about you. And I’ve heard of you from André. I’m an aid worker for Doctors Unlimited.”

“Awesome!” Katie looked back and forth between her and Ian observantly. It wasn’t like she would see anything going on between them. Ian had pretty much taken care of that when he’d broken into her room in Djibouti. “Come on in.”

Piper restrained a gasp as they stepped into a magnificent and modern space. If this was what the future of interior design looked like, she was all for it. “Wow. This place is gorgeous,” she blurted.

Katie looked around fondly. “Alex decorated it. But I wouldn’t change a thing.” She bent down to scoop up a lime green plastic thing that looked like an oversized tablet computer. “Except for adding more baby toys.”

“Where is my little princess?” Ian asked, looking around expectantly.

“She and Alex are at the park. They should be back any minute. In fact, let me text him to let him know you’re here. I know he’ll want to see you.”

Ian grinned boyishly, and he and his sister chatted and poked jokingly at each other for the next few minutes.

Piper reeled at this relaxed, happy side of him. The family man. He was *charming* when he wasn’t in mission mode. What else about him didn’t she know? Intense curiosity to find out filled her.

Katie had just returned from a kitchen that looked straight out of a science fiction future with glasses of water for her and Ian when the front door opened. A handsome, dark-haired man and arguably the cutest toddler Piper had ever seen blew through the door, laughing together.

“Un-cuh Ian!” the little girl squealed. Like her mother, she launched herself at Ian and wrapped her little arms around his neck as if she was going to strangle him. The sight of him with a child wrapped in his powerful arms melted Piper’s ovaries on the spot.

Alex—that must be the famous Doctor Alex Peters, a legend within Doctors Unlimited—clapped Ian on the shoulder. “Good to see you, bro.”

The two men traded interesting looks. Mutual respect, but something more. An acknowledgement that they were natural enemies who had incongruously become friends. Frowning, Piper glanced back and forth between them, trying to suss out what she’d just seen.

Alex asked, “How’s the knife wound? No pain or complications from being back out in the field with it?” Was *this* the fiancé who’d stabbed Ian and left that fresh, red scar on his belly?

There was that weird look again from Ian. “Nah. It’s good. I’m sorry to report that your attempt to gut me has officially failed.”

She’d half-thought Ian was kidding when he’d said his future brother-in-law had stabbed him. Apparently not.

Both men looked over at Katie affectionately. Comprehension burst across Piper’s brain. The two men might not particularly like each other, but they both loved Katie. For her sake, they were willing to put aside their differences and get

along.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Ian,” Katie announced. “I wanted to talk with you about the wedding. It’s in October, and I need you to arrange your work schedule to be home for it—“

Alex interrupted gently. “If I’m not mistaken, this isn’t entirely a social call to spoil your niece, is it, Ian?”

Katie sighed and stepped forward to lift the toddler out of her brother’s arms. “C’mon, Dawn. Let’s get you some lunch while the boys go talk business.”

Piper couldn’t blame Katie for assuming that it was just the boys on a job. Alex gestured for Ian to follow him to what turned out to be an office, and Piper trailed along, hating feeling like a third wheel.

Alex closed the office door behind them and Ian surprised her by saying, “Alex, this is Piper Roth, my partner.”

“We’ve never met, but I’ve seen your name on the Doctors Unlimited roster.” He stuck out his hand, and she shook it, a little startled. For a surgeon, he had a hell of a strong grip. And a shooter’s callous at the base of his thumb. How did he get a hold of the D.U. roster, anyway? That was supposed to be confidential.

Ian interrupted her perplexed ruminations with, “We’re tracking a terrorist who appears to have designed a weaponizable virus and disappeared with a lot of it. We need to pick up his trail and are hoping you can help.”

“What can you tell me about this terrorist?”

Piper listened as Ian recited what they knew about Yusef Abahdi and where they’d last seen him.

Alex looked over at her expectantly. “Talk to me about the virus.”

How did he know about her biomedical background? It wasn’t something that came up in casual conversation.

Suspicious and a little creeped out, she answered, “The virus appears genetically engineered with material gathered from Ebola and Lassa patients. Some or all of the Scientist’s research notes are being analyzed as we speak.”

Alex’s attention swung back to Ian. “You said he had a lot of it. Are we talking samples in petri dishes, or gallons of it ready for dispersion?”

“Gallons. He put three big coolers in the back of his vehicle.”

“He won’t have flown commercially, then. He either drove to a destination in Africa somewhere or he took a private flight to his final destination.”

Ian asked, “Can we track his flight?”

Alex shook his head in the negative. “Huge chunks of African airspace don’t have radar coverage. It’s been rumored for years that commercial-sized aircraft fly back and forth illegally between Africa and South America without ever being spotted on radar.”

“I was hoping you might be able to track his money” Ian responded.

Alex nodded. “It’s the logical way to proceed. Guy like him, though, might be getting paid in cash. Could be hard to spot.”

“What about the little girl?” Piper added. “I’ll bet he spends money on the grid to get stuff for her.”

Alex nodded thoughtfully. Then, he opened a laptop computer sitting on his desk and typed what seemed about the length of an email message. He leaned back. “This could take a while. I’ve got a few of my best people on it. If there is a trail, they’ll pick it up.”

He had an entire network of his own hackers? Who *was* this guy? She’d heard rumors that he was some sort of espionage mastermind, but this went way beyond the rumors.

Taking a flyer, she leaned forward and asked, “Do you have someone who might be able to do a little domestic poking for me?”

The intelligence in Alex Peters’ eyes as he studied her was almost frightening. For a moment, she felt a flash of gratitude that she was on the same side of the law as him. “What are we poking at?” he asked.

“I’ve been watching a homegrown separatist group out in Idaho. I believe they’re connected somehow to the Scientist. They mostly run off the grid, but two of their leaders went to North Sudan last month. The same two men made a good faith effort to kill me and Ian at the Scientist’s lab two days ago. They may have left a footprint of some kind.”

“This bunch got a name?”

“The Patrick Henry Patriots. Or just PHP.”

Alex nodded and started typing. He typed for longer this time, and eventually, he sat back, frowning. “Not a red flag kind of outfit at a glance.”

That was what she’d thought, too. Until they sent representatives to Khartoum.

“Interesting group,” Alex commented. “They don’t seem like the types to hook up with a Palestinian biological terrorist.”

“Hence my desire to get a handle on what they’re doing.”

“You think they’ve radicalized?” he asked.

God, that was the big, unanswered question, wasn’t it? She sincerely hoped not. In response to Alex, she could only shrug. “No idea.”

A new window opened up on Alex’s computer screen. “Looks like they bought a helicopter recently,” he commented.

She stared, shocked. “But they hate technology of all kinds. They think we need to go back to the 1870’s technologically to

get back in touch with the values that made us a great nation.”

Alex shrugged. “Well, they bought a helo on the 28th of last month. They used a shell corporation and nested the deal through a couple of tax shelters, but PHP is the final buyer.”

“Has it been delivered?” she asked.

“Yup. To an address in southern Nevada.”

“Nevada? Their compound is in upstate Idaho.”

“Looks like your boys are branching out. Unless they just took delivery in Nevada and are planning to fly the bird up to Idaho. Lemme see if I can track down anything more.”

Alex typed a few minutes longer. All he came up with was a description of a white helicopter with red racing stripes down its sides.

“What about the money trail on the Scientist?” Ian asked. “Any hits? He can’t go too far underground with his eight-year old daughter in tow, can he?”

Alex grimaced. “I wouldn’t want to try it with Dawn. It was bad enough getting her out of Zaghasan as a newborn when all she did was sleep and eat and poop.”

Ian laughed ruefully. “Not to mention having to get Katie out of there, too.”

Piper’s gaze snapped to Ian. Why that comment, and in that tone of voice? Because Katie was a woman? Had Ian always been this big a chauvinist and she just hadn’t noticed?

Alex shrugged. “Katie was great. I don’t know if I’d have made it out without her.”

Piper gifted him with a warm smile for his enlightenment.

“It may take a while for me to get a hit on either of your guys,” Alex said. “Can you stick around for lunch? Warning, though: Katie’s going to bend your ear over wedding stuff.”

Ian laughed. “I’ll pass. Besides, our investigation is time sensitive.”

Alex nodded. “If I hear anything, I’ll pass it on to you.”

Ian waxed sober. “Maybe you could ask your...alternate sources...if they know anything about the Scientist or PHP?”

Alex blinked, looking startled. “It’s that critical?”

“Dude, the guy’s got three coolers full of a virus that apparently is designed to kill everyone who comes into contact with it. You tell me how critical the mission is.”

Frowning, Alex pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and dialed a long number. Piper was startled when he spoke into it in rapid, apparently fluent, Russian.

She leaned over to Ian and whispered, “Our op is classified to the Moon and back. I know Alex has the clearances for it, but who’s he talking to in freaking Russian? Does that person have clearance for this?”

Ian muttered back, “He’s talking to the number three guy in the FSB. That guy has probably got plenty of clearances to hear about a few terrorists.”

Her jaw dropped. She whispered urgently, “The FSB? The *enemy*?”

Alex startled her by answering as he disconnected his cell phone. “They’re not all enemies. A few of them quietly oppose the current regime in Russian and would like to see more cooperation with the West. I do my best to keep channels of communications with those people open.”

Huh?

Ian mouthed, “Later,” at her, and flashed her a hand signal out of Alex’s line of sight to stand down.

“My source will look into it from his end. If he turns anything up, I’ll pass it on directly to you, Ian.”

“Thanks, man.”

She nodded in minor shock and rose to her feet when the men did. She watched as Ian tickled Dawn into a squealing fit of laughter and made his apologies to Katie at not being able to stay for lunch. More quickly than she’d expected, he whisked her out the door and into the elevator.

“He called the FSB, Ian,” she challenged. “Is your sister’s fiancé some sort of double agent?”

“More like a liaison between us and them. A back channel for information flow that needs to stay off-book.”

She sagged against the wall of the elevator, stunned. “And Doctors Unlimited knows about this?”

“They set it up.”

Shut the front door. No wonder McCloud felt like he could waltz into her hotel room and steal her damned evidence at will. He was connected like crazy in the intelligence community. She had never felt like more of an outsider than in that moment. She’d known the good ole’ boy network would be hard to break into. But she’d had no idea a person had to be born into the bloody club.

“Have you got any other famous spy relatives I should know about?” she asked sourly.

“Well, my uncle’s the deputy director of Plans for the CIA. Does that count?”

“Charles—” *Jesus.* “--Charles McCloud. Of course. You McClouds are everywhere, aren’t you?” The family must be some sort of intelligence royalty.

“Fertile bunch, us McClouds.”

He certainly had the smoking hot sex portion of that proposition down pat. Her belly clenched in momentary hunger for more of the McCloud magic before her brain overruled it.

“Now what?” she asked.

He smiled quickly, throwing her off balance.

“Katie asks that exact same question all the time,” he murmured in explanation.

“So...are you going to answer it?” she prodded when he didn’t say more.

He shrugged. “Until we have some idea of where to look for the Scientist, how do you feel about getting eyes on the Patrick Henry Patriots?”

Not great. But she couldn’t exactly tell him that.

Thing was, the PHP gang was her turf. Her mission. If she could nail down the PHP’s goals, it would be a win for her. A win her career could sorely use after she’d let an asset from another government agency steal her hot intel.

Unfortunately, this mission was too important for her to hold onto a snit over him stealing her thunder.

“Let’s do it,” she answered a shade reluctantly.

He glanced over at her, a lopsided grin making him look boyish. “Girls as hot as you need to be careful about saying things like that to the boys.”

Dammit, there went her gut again. And this time her brain had a much harder time stuffing her Pandora-like reaction back into its horny little box.

Piper hopped out of Ian's truck in front of her apartment building and didn't invite him in. He undoubtedly had a much nicer place in a much fancier zip code, and she had no desire to parade her general poverty in front of him.

He'd offered to walk her up to her door like he had in Khartoum, but this was America and she would be fine. She turned him down firmly. While she appreciated his protective instincts, he seemed to think she would like being hovered over like a helpless, wilting lily.

She knew all too well what it felt like to be helpless, and she'd long ago vowed to herself never to feel that way again. She'd been helpless to evade her father's unreasoning rage whenever she reminded him too much of her mother, helpless to escape his brand of crazy, helpless to stop the man for forcing her to master skills she'd never wanted to learn. She'd made it a lifelong project for nobody ever to make her feel that way again, in fact.

She reached for her front door and noticed a sliver of wood had been knocked off the door jamb at knob height. It wasn't anything big, just a thin strip of missing paint and bare pine. But still. It made her frown.

She cast a furtive glance around the basement landing and pulled her pistol from its holster in the small of her back. Quietly, she unlocked her door, stepped to one side, and eased the latch open. No violent reaction exploded. She spun through her door, crouching low, back pressed against the wall beside the door.

Holy crap. Her place was destroyed.

Tossed didn't begin to describe the mayhem. Furniture had been overturned, drawers emptied, her TV smashed to smithereens. It was hard to pick her way through the debris, but she raced to her tiny kitchen, made sure it was unoccupied, then headed down the short hall to her bedroom, bathroom, and closet. It took about sixty seconds to determine that whoever'd robbed her was gone.

She headed for the front door, turned the corner out of her bedroom and lurched as a big silhouette spun into the doorway brandishing a handgun. Her own weapon whipped up into firing position.

"Stand down!" Ian barked at her. "It's me. Ian."

Jeez. She sagged against the wall in the hallway, her heart pounding. She'd almost shot him. Not that she'd have cared all that much, of course. It just would have been messy. Blood everywhere, and *oy vey*, the paperwork.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Had a gut feeling something wasn't right. Came to check on you."

Dang. Good instincts. "As you can see, I'm fine. But my apartment is not."

"It's clear?" he bit out.

"Yes, of course." She wasn't a total amateur. She knew to clear the scene and make sure bad guys weren't lurking in a closet before she got around to assessing the damage.

He stepped gingerly into the war zone and closed the hallway door behind him. "What's missing?"

"At a glance, nothing." Which was weird. Why would a thief come in and trash her place without at least carrying out the portable electronics?

Ian righted the couch in an impressive display of casual strength that made her grit her teeth a little. The one way in which she couldn't ever be one of the boys was that raw, physical power he'd just unconsciously demonstrated.

He piled cushions on the sofa frame, making a path through the worst of the mess. Her flat screen TV was a shattered wreck, as was her desktop computer. Its tower looked like someone had taken a baseball bat to it.

Her books were intact, however, still sitting on the shelves as if nothing had ever happened. Their calm unconcern was wildly out of place in the midst of the chaos. She moved into her kitchen. Total destruction was the name of the game in here. Her coffee maker, microwave, and the nice blender she made smoothies with were smashed into spare parts and wires.

Even her stove was trashed, the electric burners torn out, handles ripped off, the oven door torn free of its hinges. Her refrigerator door hung askew and the contents of both her freezer and refrigerator had been emptied on the floor into a spectacular, drippy mess.

Thankfully, she'd only been home a day and had yet to restock on food. She'd stopped by a convenience store yesterday and grabbed only a few items to tide herself over. She grabbed a trash bag from under the sink and quickly scooped the thawing vegetables and TV dinners into it.

"You got a wrench?" Ian called from the vicinity of the bathroom.

She fetched her toolbox from the front closet and carried it back to him. She'd registered hissing in her first pass through the apartment but hadn't stopped to investigate.

As she rounded the corner into her bathroom, she stopped cold. "Oh, for crying out loud."

The intruder had smashed her sink and bathtub fixtures. A fine spray of water was the source of the hiss, and Ian was quickly getting soaked as he wrestled with the water cut-off valves. She passed him a wrench and backed out of the impromptu water park. In a few seconds, silence fell, punctuated only by occasional dripping sounds.

"Let me get you a towel," she said, "assuming I've got any left intact."

"I'll take a pile of rags if that's all you've got."

She headed for her walk-in closet to fetch an armful of towels. Okay, so it was nice having a big, strong, capable man here with her, right now. She felt a lot safer with him at her place. The sense of violation was lessened somewhat by knowing nobody else would mess with her as long as he was around.

It struck her wryly that she was being a hypocrite to gripe about him intervening to save her in Africa but being grateful he was here, now.

Fine. It hadn't been that awful having Ian looking out for her in Khartoum. She still didn't like the idea of needing his protection, but maybe it had been a good thing he'd been there.

She found her towels wadded on the floor but doubted Ian would care at this point if they were dirty. He was drenched. She stepped back into her bedroom and gulped as Ian stripped his sodden shirt over his head to reveal that gorgeous man-hunk body of his.

He took the towels she handed him and dried himself off. He used another to vigorously dry his hair. And then, oh God, he unbuckled his pants and let his dripping slacks fall to the floor. Eyes averted from his muscular legs and clinging briefs, she passed him the rest of the towel remnants.

She scooped up his clothes, mumbled something about throwing them in a dryer, and fled the apartment and nearly naked man inside. It took her until she slammed one of the building's round, dryers shut to realize she was hyperventilating. Must be delayed reaction to the shock of her place being vandalized—

--Oh, who was she trying to kid? It was a reaction to seeing Ian strip down in her freaking bedroom. Never mind that her place had taken a tactical nuclear strike.

She was not in lust with him, dammit! Okay, so she was. But it was only lust. The man had rocked her world in Khartoum. This was purely a physical reaction to the sex they'd had. Past tense. There would be no more sex between them, future tense, thank you very much.

Not to mention, they were officially working together, now. And she was vividly aware that surveillance and tracking technology was significantly better here than in Sudan. The two of them could easily be monitored by their respective employers.

Which meant that, as of two hours ago, it was not only unethical but also illegal for them to sleep together, and neither of them wanted to ruin their careers by flirting with fraternization charges.

Reassured by that thought, she managed to catch her breath. She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering strength. She could do this. She could work with Ian McCloud and keep it just business.

Ian horsed Piper's box springs and mattress back into place on the bedframe. Both were slashed beyond use, but it cleared floor space for him to move around the bedroom. The television in here was trashed, too. Along with the lamps, alarm clock, and ceiling fan.

Why in the hell would someone—a guy, given the strength required to do some of the damage in here—break into Piper's place and randomly destroy it like this? It didn't look like a typical B&E. It read more like a hate crime.

Obvious leap of logic from that—an ex-boyfriend did this. Piper could be pretty infuriating, but what did she do to make someone this enraged? He wrapped the remains of a bedsheet around his hips with the intent of tracking her down and asking her. She slipped back into the apartment just as he entered the living room, however.

"Your clothes will be dry in twenty minutes or so," she announced.

"Thanks." He gestured at the wrecked couch. "Have a seat. Let's talk."

Wariness leapt into her sapphire gaze. She perched on the edge of a cushion and looked ready to bolt at a moment's notice. He supposed she had cause to be jumpy after what she'd just walked in on.

He asked her, "Can you think of anyone who has something against you and might do something like this?"

Some strong emotion he couldn't name flashed through her eyes. "Like who?" she said cautiously.

He shrugged. "An ex, maybe?"

"No ex'es to speak of."

That surprised him. "None?" he blurted. "You're a good-looking woman with healthy appetites. Surely, someone like you has a few old boyfriends under your belt."

"Not really. I've been pretty much focused on my career since I got out of college. Even in school, I kept my head down and studied most of the time."

Which might explain some of her prickliness regarding men in general. At least he knew for sure that she liked men. A lot. He pushed aside memory and reaction to their epic sex in K-town. Right now they needed to figure out who'd trashed her place and how much danger she was in.

He said, "Are you sure nothing was taken?"

"All my electronics are here. What little jewelry I have is still in the remains of my jewelry box. Everything's just... smashed."

"So you think this was a random act of vandalism?" he asked doubtfully.

"What else could it be?"

Damn. That was what he'd feared. He heard evasion in her voice. She had some idea of who'd done this but wasn't planning to share her suspicions with him. He pressed to test a little bit. "Let's not touch anything more and call the police. If nothing else, they can lift prints and make a report for your insurance company."

A stubborn expression flashed through her eyes and she opened her mouth, obviously to protest. Closed it again. Took a deep breath. And finally, said merely, "Okay."

He leaned toward her and placed a light hand on her shoulder. "I can't help you if you won't let me, and I can't protect you if I don't know who to protect you from."

She surged up off the couch. He got the impression she would have paced if she hadn't been impeded by World War Three all over her floor. "I don't need your protection!" she burst out.

"That doesn't mean I'm not going to offer it to you," he replied evenly.

"Gah!"

What was her problem?

Given that the question was unanswerable in the absence of more information, he pushed it aside and fished out his cell phone. He found a non-emergency local police number and called it. He reported the break-in and that the place was secure and the occupant safe. The dispatcher said she'd have a unit there in a half-hour.

Which worked out perfectly. His pants and shirt were still warm out of the dryer and back on his body when a cop knocked on her door. The pictures and statement the officer took were routine except for the part where the guy flirted with Piper the entire damned time.

The cop finally left and Ian closed the door after him in relief, grouching, "Jeez. Ballsy dude to act like that with me here the whole time."

Piper waved a breezy hand. "He asked me about ten seconds after I took him into the bedroom if you and I are dating."

"And you said no. Which he took for permission to do his damndest to get in your pants," Ian replied sourly.

Now why did that irritate him so much? They both were free agents, after all. Khartoum had been...well, Khartoum. Nothing was ops normal in that place. What went on there stayed there as far as he was concerned.

They'd both been under huge stress, isolated and alone. Yeah, that was it. Two ships crossing in the night. Nothing more. If she wanted to sleep with some bonehead cop, more power to her.

"He only wanted my phone number," Piper commented mildly.

"Did you give it to him?" Fuck. He had no business asking that. The question had just popped out of his mouth before he could stop it.

Her right eyebrow arched. "As a matter of fact, I didn't. I told him I was leaving town for a few weeks, and he told me I could stop by the police department and pick up a copy of my report when I get back. And then he gave me his phone number."

Ian clenched his teeth shut and bit back the sarcastic response that jumped to his tongue. Her social life. Her decision. "Let's get out of here. Is anything left here for you to pack for our op?"

She sighed. "I doubt it. Let's just go."

He waited for her to close and lock the door on the wreck of her life. They turned to climb the stairs to street level, and he reached out to cup her elbow supportively.

"I can go up a staircase by myself," she snapped.

He frowned. "I was just being polite. My mother would shoot me if she caught me not exercising the manners she taught us boys."

"Yeah, well, you can keep your manners to yourself."

He shrugged. “You’ve had a rough day. I thought you could use a show of support.”

“I’ve got things under control,” she declared.

Right. And that was why she sounded on the verge of angry tears. She reminded him of his baby sister when Katie used to stomp her foot and insist that her big brothers let her go along on their adventures. They never had, of course. She was too little to tag along on their junkets through the woods behind their family home. She’d have gotten lost or hurt—

His attention lurched back to the present as Piper snapped, “And I can open my own car door.”

“Sheesh.” He let go of the door handle and threw his hands up in surrender. “Get your own door then if it’s that big a deal to you.”

He went around to his side of his truck as she slammed his truck’s passenger door shut with a resounding crash. “Maybe don’t break my truck,” he commented mildly as he slid in the driver’s seat.

Piper alternated between radiating anger, upset, and a hint of post-traumatic shock during the drive to his place. Not exactly the best frame of mind in which to launch an important mission. There was no help for it, though. Apparently, she knew more about the Patrick Henry Patriots than anyone else in the intelligence community. She needed to get her head in the game, like it or not.

He tensed as he unlocked the door to his apartment, and he breathed a sigh of relief to see his things were intact and not trashed. He should cut her a break. It would suck to have all his personal stuff destroyed.

Piper looked around with undisguised interest. If only she knew how rare it was for him to bring a woman here, not only because he wasn’t home often enough to pick up women in D.C., but also because he considered this his private sanctuary. It was a simple place with all the guy comforts—a big bed, a huge television, the latest game console, and a shower head he could stand under without having to duck his tall frame.

“I don’t know about you,” he commented as he moved into the kitchen, “but I always crave good, old-fashioned American pizza when I’m overseas.”

She laughed. “Nobody does pizza like Americans.”

“What do you like on yours?”

“Anything but anchovies or pineapple,” she replied.

He ordered a couple of loaded large pizzas from his favorite delivery place and grabbed two beers out of the frig. He flopped on the leather couch beside Piper

“Beer?” he offered.

“Umm, okay.”

“Relax, already. I’m not going to leap on you and ravish you,” he joked.

Piper tensed, relaxed, tensed again, and finally leaned back, as far away from him on the couch as she could go.

What the hell? What was going on in her mind? Not that he had much experience at reading women. He retreated to safe territory. “Have you got any initial ideas on how we ought to track the PHP?”

“Carefully,” she blurted.

“They’re dangerous?” he asked around the mouth of his bottle. He was a great deal more interested in her answer than he let on. But given how tight she was already wound, he made a conscious effort to keep his body relaxed and sprawled on his end of the couch.

She shrugged. “A year ago, I would’ve answered that with a firm no. But now, I don’t know.”

“Talk to me about them.”

She winced fractionally, as if she’d known the question was coming but still disliked it. He filed the reaction as interesting and something to analyze later. He also declined to mention to her that he had nearly total audio recall.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

Avoiding the subject, huh? Now why was that? He checked his first impulse, to tell her to start at the beginning and leave out nothing. Instead, he merely asked casually, “How long have they been around?”

“As an organized group, about twenty years.”

“Longer than I expected,” he replied mildly.

As he’d hoped, his lack of aggressive interest made her wax a little more talkative. She continued, “They bought their compound in Idaho about fifteen years ago. Started with a half-dozen guys and a few of their families. It has grown slowly but steadily since then. My best estimate is that they’ve got around fifty members in total.”

“Small group to be making so much trouble.”

Another one of those infinitesimal frowns creased her brow for an instant. What wasn’t she telling him? “Who’s the leader?” he asked, probing carefully.

“They don’t believe in centralized government. What makes you think they believe in centralized leadership?”

Huh. Interesting. “Surely, they’ve got a charismatic character or two who act as de facto leaders of the commune.”

An unwilling grin tugged at her mouth. “I expect they’d take serious umbrage at the word commune. The second P in their name does stand for ‘patriots’ after all.”

The obvious next question was why a group of supposed patriots were being investigated for terrorism ties. He avoided something so direct, however. At the moment, he was more interested in figuring out what was making her so jumpy about briefing him in on these guys.

“Who’s the founder?” he asked.

Wow. That made her whole body go tense.

“Guy named Joseph Brothers. Born and raised on a farm in Pennsylvania in the middle of Amish country. He was exposed to a fair number of Amish, so he was familiar with and presumably admired their non-technological way of life.”

“Why didn’t he just join them, then?”

She shrugged. “He was more ambitious than that. Thought in larger terms. It wasn’t enough to choose that kind of life for himself and quietly go about it—which would have been the Amish thing to do. Instead, he got the notion that he should share the wisdom of choosing that lifestyle with others.”

“Does he have a family?”

“Couple of kids.”

“Let me guess. He wouldn’t let his wife go to a modern medical facility and she died of some totally preventable complication.”

“Actually, no,” Piper surprised him by replying. “His wife left him.”

Ian nodded in comprehension. “Fled to the land of blow dryers and cell phones, huh? That must really toast his muffins.”

“He was well on his way to rejecting technology before his wife’s...defection. That was merely the event that pushed him over the edge into action.”

Why the hitch in her voice? He opened his mouth to ask, but a knock on his door announced the arrival of the pizza guy. He got up to carry the flat cardboard boxes to his coffee table. In bachelor fashion, he tore the top off the first box and used it as a makeshift plate. He dragged several sloppy slices of pizza onto it. Piper ate more daintily, taking one of the napkins that had come with the boxes and cradling a slice of pizza in that.

He picked up the narrative. “Okay. So Joseph’s wife leaves. The crazy switch flips on in his head, and he moves out to Idaho to start his little group. Where’d his followers come from?”

“Not followers,” she corrected dryly. “Fellow patriots.”

Was that a hint of bitterness in her voice? What in the *hell* was going on with her? “Do you not like these guys or something?”

“Or something. I think they’re the worst kind of ingrates. They’ve got this great country to live in that was built on the blood, sweat, and tears of generations of actually patriotic Americans, and they want to throw all that progress and innovation away. I think that’s insane. I don’t want to go back to one in three women dying in childbirth and its complications. And I *like* having all my teeth. I like phones and cars and electricity. Heck, I like air conditioning and the Internet!”

He grinned as he picked up another slice of pizza. “You don’t have to convince me. I’d be lost without ESPN and my truck. And a refrigerator for my beer.”

She smiled reluctantly. He let her eat pizza for a few minutes until her shoulders came down from around her ears and a more open expression filled her face.

“How much money do these PHP guys have?” he asked casually. That seemed like an innocuous enough question.

“Hard to tell. They spend practically nothing on their lifestyle. Some of them came to the compound with assets that have probably been sitting in banks and compounding for a while. They also sell a self-published guide on how to live off the grid. For all I know, they could be making good money from that.

“Enough money to have purchased a helicopter and paid to train someone to fly it?” he asked lightly.

“I’ve never seen any evidence that they have that kind of capital.”

“Let’s assume they don’t have that kind of cash lying around. Where would they get it? They don’t strike me as the types to get a loan from a bank.”

She snorted. “What bank in its right mind would give them a loan?”

“Good point.”

She stared off into space for a while before announcing, “I’m stumped.”

“Has someone new joined the group? Radicalized it in some way? Brought significant cash resources to the PHP?”

“Possible,” she answered slowly. “I’d have to get eyes on the compound. See if there are any new faces I don’t recognize.”

“Let’s do it, then. While we wait for Alex and his hackers to trace the money trail for that helicopter, let’s go to Idaho and check out these guys.”

“It’ll be dangerous,” she warned.

He shrugged, unconcerned. “Then we’ll be careful.” After all, how dangerous could Podunksville, Idaho be compared to Khartoum? And it wasn’t like he was an amateur at this stuff.

She nodded, but that shadow was back in her eyes. His internal warning antennae wiggled in response. He silently told his instincts that they were duly noted and to pipe down. In the meantime, he suggested, “You ready to turn in? The next few days

could be long ones.”

She looked around the apartment wildly for a second. “Here? You want me to crash here?”

“Someone broke into your place and trashed it. Whoever did that knows where you live and obviously has serious beef against you. I’m not letting you out of my sight tonight, and don’t even try to argue with me.”

“But—“

He cut her off. “You’re just going to have to deal with my Neanderthal tendencies to protect you, like it or not.”

Her gaze snapped to his, and all of a sudden, thick sexual tension vibrated tautly in the air between them. “Ahh, darlin’,” he sighed. “you shouldn’t have looked at me like that.”

He stood up, lifted the empty beer bottle out of her fingers and took her hands, pulling her easily to her feet. He wasn’t used to such conflict raging on the faces of his women, but the sleepy lust hazing over her blue eyes was definitely familiar. That, he knew what to do with.

“I’ve missed you, too,” he murmured as he took a step closer to her lithe body.

She made a tiny sound of protest even as her eyelids got heavier and desire poured off her as thick as molasses. She mumbled, “I’m still mad at you for stealing my evidence.”

His left hand slid up to cup the back of her head under her silky hair, and his right hand slid around her slender waist. He murmured, “I gave you full credit for having collected it. Everyone was very impressed with the information you brought back.”

“And I’m still mad at you for leaving me behind in Africa.”

He slid his hand lower to the curve of her rear end, which fit perfectly in his hand. He murmured lower, “You were on a secure American facility, and you’re smart as hell. I knew you wouldn’t have any trouble getting home. And you seemed interested in demonstrating your independence.”

“But...” her breath hitched as his palm tightened on her behind, “...you left me.”

His voice was a bare thread of sound against her temple. “Ahh, sweet Piper. Is that what’s got you so fired up?”

Gently, so as not to spook her, he drew her hips close to his. Let her feel his desire for her. Tilted his head down to let his breath mingle with hers.

Nothing fast. No aggressive moves that would make her more tense than she already was. He even caught himself making soothing noises in the back of his throat as he let his breath wash over her temple. Her cheek. Her ear.

“I’m...very...sorry...I...left...you.” He punctuated each word with a light kiss on her face. Her cheek. Her brow. Her nose. Her chin.

She pulled in a shaky breath and let it out on a gust of surrender as she finally leaned into him, her arms snaking around his neck. Thank God. His restraint was good, but not invincible.

He whispered, “I promise I won’t leave you again.” Her lips tilted up toward his, slightly parted, and he took the invitation, his mouth closing on hers and finding the perfect angle and fit between them. She tasted spicy like pepperoni, and sweet like the mint hard candies that had come with the pizza. That was Piper—hot and cold. Fire and ice. An intriguing mystery he had yet to solve.

Lord, he’d missed her. Missed this with her. Missed the way the long tendons in her throat tensed as she threw her head back. He loved the tiny gasping moans that escaped her, the way her teeth captured her lower lip, the way her entire body pulsed as if she couldn’t get enough of him.

Throw pillows went flying. A lamp crashed to the floor. At this rate, his place was going to be as trashed as hers before they were done. Not that he gave a flying flip. This woman was sex incarnate.

If he thought their sex in Khartoum had been great, tonight blew all of that away. He wasn’t listening with half an ear for violence outside and completely lost himself in Piper, and she seemed to do the same with him and went all in on enjoying herself.

When he could actually stand, walk, and form coherent thoughts again, he was going to classify that as the best sex he’d ever had. By a mile. And then he was going to do it again. A lot.

“We can’t ever do that again,” Piper panted.

A single thought blasted across his mind, and he gave voice to it incredulously. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Piper huffed, not exactly steady emotionally. She hated having to be strong for both of them when all she wanted to do was curl up in his arms and never, ever emerge.

“C’mon, Ian. You know the rules. We’re going to be on a mission together. Colleagues.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t.”

God almighty, she was tempted to take that deal. Which scared the hell out of her. She didn’t need other people. Ever.

He pushed a damp tendril of hair off her forehead, and the gentleness of the gesture all but undid her. She’d had a crappy day, and she’d just needed to escape it all for a little while. That was all this was. Nothing more. It wasn’t about emotional connection or being wanted, held, and cherished by another human being. They were scratching a mutual itch. That was all.

Then how come sex with him tonight felt like a whole lot more?

“We can’t,” she declared. Just a little longer to enjoy his delicious weight pressing her down into the cushions. And then she would push him away, get up, get dressed, and get to work.

“Give me one good reason why not—” he retorted, “—besides ‘it’s the rule.’”

She stared up at him at a loss. Heck, she was lucky to remember her own name right now. Her body was still drugged with lazy pleasure and sated lust. “Ian—” she started. The little voice in the back of her head whispered persuasively, *just a little more*.

He reached for her and drew her up against him.

“No. Fair.”

“Love and war, baby,” he murmured back.

Dammit.

Piper woke up slowly, disoriented. Unfamiliar bed. Unfamiliar room. She rolled over cautiously and was relieved to recognize the face on the pillow beside her. Ian. Right. Break-in at her place. Beer at his place. And sex. Lots and lots of the hot variety of that.

She eased out from under the covers carefully so as not to wake him. The bastard was even pretty when he slept. His sun-bleached hair was tousled and a light stubble roughed his jaw. The muscular arm thrown over his head would make a fashion photographer weep with joy.

She tiptoed into the living room where she vaguely recalled her clothes having gone flying at some point. She turned everything right side out and dressed quickly. Her blouse was missing a button near the collar, but the garment was still wearable, just with a little extra cleavage. She grabbed her purse and eased the front door shut soundlessly behind her.

Ian lived close to a Metro stop and she hustled down the street, breathing a sigh of relief when she disappeared below ground. Things were complicated between the two of them, and she didn’t want to deal with it this morning. Last night had been a mistake. Actually, a series of glorious mistakes.

Fine. He was a god in the sack. That still didn’t make it smart or right to have a torrid affair with him.

She could use a shower and a fresh change of clothes, but her home and her wardrobe were in ruins. It was too early to go shopping, so she swung by the police station instead to pick up a copy of the police report on her break-in. As she’d rightly suspected, the cop who’d flirted with her last night was not on duty this morning. She collected the report and browsed through the list of destroyed items the police officer had noted.

Huh. She glanced through the list again. Places where she might hide something had all been emptied or cut open—her sofa cushions, mattress, refrigerator, closets, and drawers. Every single item in her home that was electronic, mechanical, or plugged into an electric socket was on this list, yet not one of them had been stolen—

--Oh, *shit*.

A cold chill passed over her and goose bumps puckered her forearms. How had the Patrick Henry Patriots found her? For surely, they were behind the break-in. Who else would have targeted all the technology in her house without stealing any of it?

Memory of her books sitting in blissfully undisturbed rows on her shelves shivered through her. Her bicycle had been unharmed in the corner of her bedroom. Her backpacking gear had been undisturbed in her closet. But everything else, from lamps, to alarm clocks, to computers, had been trashed.

She stumbled out onto the sidewalk, and for the first time since Khartoum, felt exposed. Watched. Anonymously hated. It was deeply unsettling, almost more so than in Sudan where she expected such things. But this was America. Home.

Her cell phone vibrated, startling her, and she fished it out. "Hello?"

"Where are you?" Ian asked tersely.

And, on cue, Ian McCloud was close at hand to rescue her. God, that man had radar for when she was in trouble...or more accurately when she was screwing up by the numbers. If only their work lives didn't keep intersecting like this! It was bad enough that they couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other. But she really needed to forge her own identity as a bona fide field operator without him always having to save her from herself.

Belatedly she answered his question about her current location. "I'm at the police station. Picking up my report."

"Our stuff's ready for pick-up. Meet you same place as yesterday in an hour?"

"Sure," she answered. Defense Intelligence had their in-brief and legend for the surveillance op ready to go, huh? That was fast. Somebody'd worked all night pasting their images onto ID's and activating the backstories in their legends.

Ian disconnected without trying to bring up last night or why she'd slipped out this morning without waking him, for which she was deeply grateful. She had just enough time to swing by a boutique and pay entirely too much for dark slacks and a plain white blouse—with all of its buttons—before she headed to the briefing.

If she thought to show up Ian by being ten minutes early and beating him to the meeting, she was wrong on both scores. He was already in the conference room, joking around with the tech guys gathered to brief them in.

He shot her a level stare when she walked into the room that was anything but morning-after-great-sex pleasant. Okay, so he was pissed that she'd snuck out on him. At least it had the side benefit of making him look like he despised her a little. No one would suspect they'd been having smoking hot sex a few hours ago, right?

She took a seat and pointedly ignored him, vividly aware of how attuned the analysts in this room were to vibes between people. Let them all think she and Ian hated each other's guts. They wouldn't be entirely wrong. The two of them had had a love-hate thing going from the very first time they'd met, now that she thought about it. More hate than love if Ian's veiled glare was any indication.

Under any other circumstances, she would have been one of the Subject Matter Experts giving this briefing on the PHP, if not the lead briefer. She sat on the receiving side of the table this morning, however. Still, she leaned forward to listen critically. Maybe these guys had something to add to her already extensive knowledge of the PHP. Like what in the bloody hell had changed to send these guys up to the terrorist big leagues all of a sudden.

The overview the briefers gave her and Ian on the PHP sounded lifted pretty much verbatim out of her reports. There was one bit of new information that caught her attention, though. Surveillance indicated the group had expanded in size recently. The analysts speculated that it was possible the new blood might have radicalized the group. Which could also explain the recent activity in North Africa.

Then the legend-and-cover briefer startled her by announcing, "We've prepared a legend for the two of you as a married couple."

She lurched forward in her seat while Ian threw himself backward in his. "Married?" they both squawked simultaneously.

Hey. Ian didn't have to sound so outraged at the idea. She wasn't a complete troll, and she'd rocked his world at least a little in the sack, thank you very much.

The briefer frowned at both of them. "Well, yes. You yourself describe the area as deeply conservative, religious, and suspicious, Ms. Roth. A married couple raises less flags than a boyfriend-girlfriend pair."

"We're not going to infiltrate the PHP compound, are we?" Ian demanded.

She froze in horror. No way was she going into the PHP compound voluntarily! She glanced over at Ian and cursed under her breath. He'd caught her violent reaction to his question. Too damned observant, that man was.

"No, sir," the briefer answered. She exhaled in profound relief as the guy continued, "But long-term surveillance will be difficult to maintain without the two of you being spotted by locals."

"Why?" Ian demanded.

Piper tuned out as the briefer explained. She'd been in that corner of Idaho before. A lot. She knew the answer already. Everyone watched everyone else. Everyone knew everyone else. Everyone gossiped about everyone else. Anonymity was impossible.

As it was, she needed to consider changing her appearance before they commenced operations. She'd been toying with getting a haircut anyway. And she could go brunette. She'd always secretly fantasized about having dark, mysterious locks and

dramatic coloring instead of her fair, pale hair- and skin-tones. A chin-length bob—

“Piper?”

She looked up sharply at Ian. “Sorry. What?”

“Do you want to work a regional accent into your legend?”

“Nah. Generic mid-western will raise less flags in Elkville than a distinctive accent of some kind.”

The briefer continued, “You’ve been married under a year. That way, if you don’t know things about each other, it can be explained away.”

“And we’ll be in Elkville why?” Ian asked.

The briefer grinned. “You’re looking for someplace to settle. A simpler way of life. Not sure about going entirely off grid but definitely interested in being more self-sufficient.”

“How did we hear about this place?” Ian fired at the guy.

The briefer passed a slightly crumpled pamphlet across the table. Piper couldn’t help the shudder that passed through her at seeing the PHP pamphlet. Everything it stood for made her faintly ill.

“You okay?” Ian murmured to her.

Damn him and his mad observation skills. “I’ll be fine,” she snapped.

“Future tense. Not fine now. Why not?”

Sometimes, she seriously wished he were a little less quick on the uptake. She huffed. “I’m good, now. Everything’s fine. Perfect.”

The pucker between his brows deepened, but he said nothing more.

The briefer picked up with, “A military transport will fly you to Montana. A pick-up truck will be waiting for you. The two of you will drive to Elkville. Rent a cabin in the Trout Creek Fishing Camp just outside of town, then commence your surveillance op. Your cover is that you’re enjoying a hunting and fishing vacation while scoping out the area—“

The briefing room door slammed open and Ian’s boss burst in, announcing without preamble, “New plan. We may have spotted Abahdi. Or rather, his daughter.”

“Where?” Piper blurted. What was Abahdi’s target?

“California. Theme Park. Three guesses which one and the first two don’t count.”

She groaned while Ian leaned forward and asked, “Los Angeles basin is the target of the biological attack, then?”

“Unknown, but possible.”

Piper’s mind raced. The one thing they didn’t know about Abahdi’s test tubes of killer virus was whether he would pass them on to someone else or if he would use them himself. Her instinct was that the man would want personal revenge for his wife’s death.

The general continued, “I’ve called Andrews Air Force Base. A flight crew sitting alert has already been launched to fly you two to Orange County. They’ll be ready to go in under an hour. Find Abahdi, verify his identity, apprehend him, and make the bastard sing.”

Piper glanced over at Ian in time to see the infinitesimal nod at his boss. Message received and understood. No holds barred on this one. At all costs, all extremes, find out where those coolers of biological samples had gone.

“Do I have time to swing by my place and grab my kit, sir?” Ian bit out.

“We’ll pull generic go-bags for you and a kit for you.”

“I need one, too,” she added sharply. No way was she going to Idaho unarmed while Ian had a full compliment of weapons and gear.

The general briefly looked startled. “Of course,” he replied, continuing with, “Marines are scrambling a helicopter to the roof to pick you up. In fact, we need to head upstairs, now. We’ll talk as we walk.”

Piper was a little shell-shocked at the speed with which events were moving. She’d never even been close to an operation with this kind of push behind it. Her surveillance missions had been sleepy affairs where she set up shop somewhere obscure in the guise of doing humanitarian aid work and watched someone equally obscure from a safe distance. Like the Patrick Henry Patriots.

What in the *hell* had those guys gotten themselves involved in? Worry vibrated through her body unpleasantly as an elevator whisked them to the roof. The all-too-familiar faces passed through her mind’s eye. None of them were hardcore terrorists. She would bet her life savings on it.

She followed the men outside onto a rooftop terrace and a terrific view of downtown Washington, D.C.

“I’ll have the techies send you an updated briefing en route,” the general told Ian.

God, even her temporary boss acted like she was hardly part of this op. “And why aren’t we sending in the entire west coast FBI contingent to grab this guy?” she asked.

“The virus. Can’t spook him into turning it loose in the middle of a frigging theme park. We don’t know for sure if this is our guy, either. We need a solid ID on Abahdi, and a very quiet grab. Followed, of course by a fast and complete confession.”

A growing thwocking noise made her look over her shoulder. A white-topped helicopter with a dark green body was

coming into sight. “Holy cow. Is that Marine One?” she blurted. Surely, they hadn’t scrambled the president’s own chopper for her and Ian.

“Same unit. Same birds. Not tasked to POTUS today, however.”

POTUS—President of the United States. Whoa. A short set of steps folded down just behind the cockpit and she and Ian jogged over to them. Intellectually, she understood that she didn’t have to duck under the rotors well over her head, but she did, anyway. A Marine with practically no hair and more bulging muscles than ought to be legal gave them a fast safety briefing she didn’t hear a word of. The bird lifted off and swooped away to the south toward Andrews Air Force Base.

She leaned back in the comfortable leather seat. Finally. A second to breathe. All of this was moving so fast.

“So. Care to tell me why you bailed out on me this morning?” Ian asked without warning.

She glanced forward in alarm at the Marine sitting just behind the cockpit.

“Oh, please. Those guys hear all kinds of classified dirt. Nothing we talk about is going to shock them or leave this aircraft.

They’re professionals.”

He might be right, but she still didn’t want to talk about it. “I already told you. We can’t do that on the job.”

“We damned well can, now. It’s part of our cover to be married. Hell, it’s practically required for this job.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “The general already treats me like a glorified receptionist and coffee fetcher. I can’t afford to do anything to ruin what little credibility I’ve got with him and the other brass.”

Ian frowned. “He doesn’t know you. You’re an outsider. If he’s standoffish, it has nothing to do with your gender. He’s just cautious with people he doesn’t know well.”

“Still. This is the first high-profile op I’ve worked. I have to make a good impression.”

“The general sent you out with me. You already made a good impression or you’d have been sidelined. You brought in the evidence from Abahdi’s lab, after all. I made sure you got full credit for that.”

She heard the words, but she didn’t believe them. Ian was blowing sunshine up her butt because he wanted her to sleep with him. Her expression hardened.

“How come you don’t trust me?” Ian demanded. “I’ve had your back on multiple occasions, and we get along famously in the sack, if I do say so, myself. What else do you want from me?”

“A little professional respect would be nice,” she snapped.

“What are you talking about? I think you’re a hell of a shooter, and you handled yourself like a pro when the bullets were flying. I wouldn’t go out on this op with you if I didn’t think you could pull your weight.”

She just glared at him.

He blurted, “Is this about the flash drive and those mice? Let go of your grudge, already.”

Was she holding a grudge? Startled by the idea, she examined the notion. She had always worked alone before. Maybe she didn’t know how to work with others. But still, she hadn’t asked him to run into that damned burning building after her. The intel was hers. She should have been the one to hand it over to Uncle Sam—

Her train of thought was interrupted by their arrival at Andrews and quick transfer to a sleek Learjet for their trip to the west coast. They’d just leveled off at altitude when the laptop computer that had been in Ian’s go-bag beeped.

“Briefing’s coming in,” he announced.

The full intel dump on the possible Abahdi sighting didn’t have a lot of additional information for them. A few grainy pictures from long-range security cameras. A security specialist at the theme park had noticed a little girl matching Salima Abahdi’s description, accompanied by a male of the right height and build for Yusef. In every picture of him, though, the man’s face was obscured by sunglasses and a baseball cap such that it was impossible to make a positive ID. Which was, in and of itself, suspicious.

Piper studied the poor quality photos of the girl closely. “She looks happy.”

“Her life’s about to implode,” Ian replied grimly.

“Her life already imploded when her mother died.” Piper knew all about that one. Her mother might have run away, but the loss was total, just the same. The only thing Piper remembered about her mother was her smell. And the safe, happy feeling of being hugged by her.

Ian pulled her back into the present with, “If it comes to a grab, you take the girl. I’ll take the father.”

“I thought the grab was supposed to be low key. We don’t want to scare him into releasing the virus. Assuming he hasn’t done so already—“ She broke off, thinking hard.

“What?”

She looked over at Ian. “Would Abahdi expose himself and his daughter to the virus?”

Ian frowned. “Don’t know. Maybe. He had his kid with him at that lab where he was working on it.”

“Yeah, but the lab was tightly controlled. Fans vacated the air directly out of the basement, and the containment chamber for the viruses he worked with looked pretty decent. I would interpret that to mean he didn’t want to kill his daughter.”

Ian nodded. “Let’s follow your logic. If he doesn’t want to kill his kid, he probably hasn’t turned the virus loose on Los Angeles. Where, then?”

“If we’re excluding Los Angeles, then we need to exclude all of southern California. Given wind shifts, he couldn’t be sure of his daughter being safe if they accidentally got downwind of the virus release.”

“It’ll carry on air, then?” Ian asked.

Piper sighed. “Lassa fever spreads by nearly every vector known to man, including airborne vectors. If Abahdi has successfully hybridized some sort of Ebola-Lassa cross, I would expect it to go airborne.”

“Translation into dumb soldier talk, please?”

He was anything but a dumb soldier. She refrained from correcting him, however, and explained, “I believe his engineered virus will spread on currents of air. If an infected person were to exhale, the virus would hang in the air and could be inhaled by a passerby. In addition, if the containers of the virus in Abahdi’s coolers were, say, sprayed into the ventilation systems of a large building, the virus would be carried to every corner of the structure.”

Ian swore quietly under his breath.

“Oh, it gets better. Lassa also spreads through casual bodily fluid transfers—kissing, sex, sweat, my blood getting into your wound, or even when an infected fly or mosquito bites you and shares its saliva with you.”

“Yeesh.”

She continued grimly, “As if that’s not enough, Lassa spreads through animal feces like rats, mice, and yes, humans. Mouse poops in a tub of flour that gets made into bread you eat, and you’re at risk. Which is to say it also spreads in foods.” She warmed to her subject. “And then there’s touch. If I have some of the Lassa virus on my palm and shake your hand, you’d pick it up on your skin. Next time you rub your nose or eye, boom. You’re infected.”

“Jeez.”

“The good news with Lassa is it kills only about a third of the people who contract it. And, modern anti-viral meds are generally effective on serious cases.”

“The bad news?”

“It spreads like wildfire once it gets into a human population. Infect enough people, and the outbreak could overwhelm the medical system.”

“You think we’re looking at a Lassa-style outbreak?” Ian asked.

“I think we’re looking at something considerably worse. Yusef was also playing with Ebola. That particular little beast is less contagious and is a more fragile virus, but it kills many more people who contract it. Under the best of care, mortality can still run close to fifty percent. In the rudimentary care available in third world countries, mortality can creep up toward ninety-five percent.”

“Cripes. What if he’s managed to create a bug that combines Ebola’s lethality with Lassa’s easy spread?”

She studied him soberly. “Then we’d be up shit’s creek without a paddle.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

The whine of the engines filled the heavy silence between them for a few minutes. “Does this superbug have any weaknesses?” Ian asked.

She shrugged. “No idea. I haven’t seen the virus at work and I didn’t design it. Yusef might be able to tell us if his stuff has an Achilles’ heel.”

“If it doesn’t?” Ian bit out.

“No paddle, dude.”

The silence between them was longer this time. Idly, she studied Salima’s grainy picture again. In this shot, Yusef’s hand rested on his daughter’s slim shoulder. Protectively. Lovingly. Good dad, this terrorist scientist. Far too protective to risk his baby girl’s life in any way. If she were in his shoes, she would’ve delivered the virus to its buyer or end destination and then gotten his daughter the hell away from it. Preferably upwind of it.

“I think he has already delivered the virus to its end buyer. Or released it,” she announced. She walked Ian through the logic of Yusef protecting his daughter, and her partner nodded, tight-jawed.

“What kind of incubation time are we looking at?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Eight to ten days for Lassa and Ebola under normal circumstances. Can stretch to as long as around three weeks. But Yusef could have sped that up in the course of engineering the virus. It will depend on how fast his virus replicates and how fast enough of the virus grows inside a body to make the host symptomatic. At a minimum, I’d say we’re looking at three to five days.”

“So we’re on a very short clock to find this guy and get him to tell us where the virus went.”

“Assuming he knows. If he sold it or merely delivered it to a client, he may not know,” she pointed out.

Ian shoved a distracted hand through his hair. “For the sake of whoever lives where that stuff gets cut loose, let’s hope you’re wrong.”

They stared at each other across the narrow aisle, expressions worried. They were up against a hell of a wall, here. “Are you sure we shouldn’t call in the cavalry?” she asked in a small voice.

“We can’t spook this guy. And we already have access to all the support Uncle Sam can give us. But the approach has to be

quiet enough not to freak out Yusef.”

“Are you planning to grab him in the middle of the theme park?” she asked skeptically.

“He and his daughter may have left by the time we get there. FBI’s working with the park’s security team to get a tail on him before that happens and we lose him.”

Again. The word hung, unspoken, in the air. Ian was being kind not to point out that he’d lost Yusef because of her the last time he’d had eyes on the Scientist. But they both knew it. This crisis was her fault.

Ian spoke low. “Hey, look. No one’s sure this guy and his kid are Abahdi and his daughter. First order of business is to ID him. Then we’ll take things as they come.”

“I’m sorry I got in the way of you trailing him in South Sudan. For what it’s worth, I am grateful you came into that house and saved my life.”

He shrugged. “What’s done is done.”

“You really can put bad decisions behind you just like that?” she asked, startled. “Just shrug and move on?”

“Can I go back and change the decision? No. Can I change what’s happened since? No. Why worry about that stuff, then? I can only operate in the now. If I’m lucky, I can anticipate future events and attempt to influence them. That’s the stuff I worry about. Stuff I can do something about.”

“Wow. How enlightened of you.”

“Just being realistic. Besides,” he commented lightly, “I’m not entirely convinced it was a bad decision to come into that house after you.” \

Her jaw dropped, and he added humorously, “I gather you’re the type who obsesses about past mistakes and replays arguments in your head to think of the perfect thing you should have said but didn’t think of at the time?”

“Maybe,” she replied cautiously.

“Hah. You’re an after-obsesser.”

He didn’t know the half of it. She snorted. “Is that some new personality disorder I’ve never heard of? After-obsessing?”

“Yeah. I just invented it to describe you.”

“Thanks for the diagnosis, Dr. Freud.”

“No hard feelings. We’re all a little crazy.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s your preferred flavor of crazy?”

“I’ve been told I can be a bit of a control freak.”

She grabbed her heart dramatically. “No! Say it’s not so!”

“Screw you, Roth,” he chuckled.

“Been there, done that,” she retorted.

He glanced at the closed curtain between them and the cockpit. “Ever join the mile-high club? Or in this case, the seven-mile-high club?”

Her gaze narrowed. “No, and I don’t plan to. We’re working on a vitally important mission. There will be no hanky panky.”

“Hanky panky?” he echoed, grinning. “Would that involve shenanigans and hijinks, too?”

She flashed him the bird, and he grinned broadly. But the expression faded too quickly for her comfort. He said, “You still haven’t told me why you took off this morning.”

“I just got up and left while you snored your head off. Not my fault you were dead asleep and all my banging around didn’t rouse you.”

“Honey, I’ve been a Special Forces operative forever. A leaf falling to the ground has been known to wake me. You *snuck* out.”

Busted. “So you admit I’m Special Forces quiet?” she challenged.

He frowned. “I’ve never questioned your skills.”

“No. Just my right to be out in the field.”

“Why would I have something against you being out in the field?” he asked a shade indignantly.

“Oh, come on. We both know what you think of women being operators like you.”

“No woman’s ever gonna be an operator like me. I’m bigger, stronger, and faster than a woman. However—“ he talked over her when she began to squawk in outrage, “—that doesn’t mean a woman couldn’t be a perfectly fine operator. She would just have to work differently than me. Your problem is you’re trying to do things the way a guy would. You need to think more like a woman. Use your gender as a strength, not a weakness.”

“What the hell does that mean? You think I should put on a skirt and high heels and *sashay* my way into dangerous military situations with, what? With a garter belt and a condom for self-protection?”

He shrugged. “I’m just trying to give you a little food for thought. Nothing more.”

Her shoulder blades hit the seatback hard. *Think like a woman.* Chauvinist sonofabitch--

“I’m gonna take a nap,” Ian announced. “You never know when we’ll get another chance to grab some shut-eye.”

As infuriating as he could be, the jerk had a point. Neither of them had gotten a whole lot of sleep last night in between

bouts of athletic and exhausting sex. None of which were *ever* going to be repeated.

Eyes on the prize, Piper. Eyes on the prize.

Yeah, but what prize?

She woke up when the Learjet bumped onto the runway in Orange County. No surprise, a black SUV was waiting for them on the ramp when they stepped off the Learjet. In under fifteen minutes, they stood at the theme park's main entrance. A guy in dress slacks, white business shirt, and cartoon tie met them as they exited the vehicle.

"Hi, I'm Nick. Park Security and company liaison to the FBI. If you'd come with me..."

They followed him through a decorative wrought iron gate to one side of the customer turnstiles and into another world. Backstage, as it were. Workers in all kinds of costumes and colorful uniforms hustled along a paved, utilitarian path. Nick loaded the two of them into a golf cart and whisked them off in a wide circle around the park proper toward the far side of the complex.

"Your target and his daughter got in line to ride the giant carousel about five minutes ago, but I have no report of them having gotten off the ride, yet. Moving backstage like this is the fastest way to get to the other side of the park. That, and we don't like to disturb our guests with foot chases or racing vehicles that might signal a problem."

In about three minutes, the security man led them through another gate and into the crowded theme park. He spoke briefly into a cell phone and took off at a brisk walk. "This way."

A lean man who, at a glance, looked like Yusef Abahdi, rode round and round on a huge carousel beside a little girl who did, indeed, look a lot like Salima Abahdi.

"You're pretty visible out here, Nick. If you could fade into the background a bit, we'll take it from here," Ian murmured. "Thanks for your help with this."

"Yeah, sure. Just got a text--the FBI's positioning vehicles at every exit from the parking lots as we speak. Here's the team's cell phone number—" He shared the contact information with each of their phones. "—and here's my cell phone number if you need to talk directly to me. Our people will keep eyes on you and your guy via the security cams."

Ian and Piper nodded and looked down at their phones for a few seconds—both of them were trained at quickly and flawlessly memorizing sequences like phone numbers.

The security man moved away, and Ian glanced around. He surprised Piper by grabbing her hand and dragging her toward a vendor pushing a refrigerated cart. He bought them each ice cream sandwiches and dragged her over to a park bench facing the carousel.

"Smile, Piper. We're on vacation."

"That's us. The happy honeymooners." She tore the wrapper off her treat and took a big bite of her ice cream sandwich. *Oh, God. Brain freeze. Crap.* She suffered in silence as the merry-go-round started to slow down.

She muttered, "Carousel exit is to our left. Still planning to follow them out of the park and back to their lodgings?"

"Gotta get close first and make the ID. If it's him, then we'll follow him home. That's our best chance of finding the samples if he's still got them."

"You can tell this is a celebration for him and Salima just by looking at their body language. No way would he bring her here with the virus nearby."

Ian studied their targets for a minute. "I concur. Still. Let's stick to the plan. No need to traumatize the other kids."

Memory of him tickling his niece flashed through her mind. He seemed at ease with little kids. Would he be as good a dad as she thought? It was definitely not in her future to find out.

They walked right up behind Yusef and his daughter. Close enough to hear the guy talking to her in Arabic. Close enough to hear the Palestinian accent in his vowels, even. She glanced sidelong at Ian, who had a better view of their quarry's face, and he nodded back at her just once. Confirmation that this was, indeed, the Scientist.

Following Abahdi and his daughter was ridiculously easy. As long as she and Ian were holding hands and smiling, they

blended in with the vacationing crowd. Abahdi was tall enough that Ian had no trouble keeping an eye on the guy's baseball cap in the press of tourists.

"For a guy who's just delivered the instrument of death for thousands, he seems pretty relaxed," Piper commented low.

"He's not looking for tails, that's for sure."

"Is he resigned to being caught or just that confident?"

"Don't know. Let's find out." Ian sped up, closing the gap between them as a park exit loomed.

Abahdi and his daughter left the park and boarded a shuttle that would take them to their car. Ian and Piper ran for the same shuttle, laughing, and caught the shuttle just as it pulled away from the curb. A quick cell phone call to the nearest FBI vehicle arranged for them to be picked up near the other end of the shuttle run.

"You got eyes on our FBI wheels?" Ian muttered as he leaned over to hug her and disguise peering over her shoulder.

"About a hundred feet back, next row over" she whispered just before she bit Ian's ear.

"Vixen," he muttered. "Be warned: I don't get mad. I get even."

She laughed low. "Big words, Mister."

Abahdi and his daughter got off the shuttle and walked to a nondescript rental car. Piper texted the license plate to the FBI team, then followed Ian over a row of cars to where a white SUV waited for them.

Ian jumped in the passenger seat and Piper piled into the back. The FBI agent pulled into the outbound flow of park traffic smoothly. They traded a few desultory comments about how much space to give Abahdi while they all kept their stares glued on his car. This had to go right. They had to nail Abahdi. Get him to tell them where the virus was going to be released.

It took nearly an hour for Abahdi to turn into a mid-range chain hotel parking lot. The FBI guy drove past the hotel then turned around at the next cross-street while Piper watched in silent panic out the rearview window to make sure their quarry didn't slip away from them. Not that the Scientist had shown even the slightest hint of evasion or concern about tails in his behavior so far.

Their SUV finally pulled into the hotel parking lot.

"Set up a perimeter," Ian told the guy. "Very, very quiet. Keep it out of sight. But at all costs, don't let this guy out of the building without us."

The agent nodded crisply. He spoke briefly into a cell phone and then reported, "Cordon's in place."

Wow. That was fast. The FBI must have had a bunch of vehicles running parallel to them this whole time. She hadn't spotted any of them. Nice.

"Okay, kid. We're up," Ian said as he climbed out of the vehicle.

She followed him into the lobby. Ian waved the front desk attendance to silence as he moved around the front desk and into the office behind it. Piper followed, smiling reassuringly, her hands held out to indicate she was harmless.

Ian flashed his military ID quickly and explained in low tones to the guy, who turned out to be the manager on duty, that he needed to know the room number of the man in the ball cap who had just come in with his daughter.

"You mean Mr. Tariq?" the manager asked.

Ian showed the guy a picture of Salima Abahdi. "This is his daughter."

"Yes, yes. That's Salima Tariq. Sweet little girl. Nice man. Is he in trouble?"

"Not at all," Ian replied. "We need his help with a sensitive government investigation, and it needs to be kept low-key. For his safety, we don't want to draw any attention to Mr. Tariq. If you'll just give me his room number and a master key, we'll have a small chat with him and be out of your hair."

"I can't give you a key, Mr. McCloud."

"I've got a dozen FBI agents ringing this building. Do you need me to have them storm the place and freak out your other guests?"

"No, but a warrant would be nice."

"No time. This is a national security matter. I am, in fact, authorized to take a key by force, but I'd much rather have your cooperation—"

Piper interjected. Getting into a pissing match with this guy wouldn't do anyone any good. "I'm a scientist. Mr. Tariq is the leading expert in the world in genetically engineered retro-virus recombination. It's my fault we're here. I have to talk to him right away, and these nice men from the FBI have been ordered to make the conversation happen. Because of the sensitive nature of our work, people like Mr. Tariq and I can be a little, umm, paranoid."

She leaned closer to the manager and smiled a little. "I wouldn't answer my door if a stranger knocked on it. I might even flee the room. Thing is, I've got to talk to him right away. There's a...problem. A virus has gotten away from us. I desperately need Mr. Tariq's help regaining control of it."

The manager looked like his resolve to demand a warrant was starting to waver. She pressed her advantage. "Left to their own devices, these FBI guys would storm the room and scare Salima to death. She's already had enough bad shocks in her life. I don't want to traumatize a child. Please help me protect that little girl." She rested a beseeching hand on the guy's sleeve and poured on the helplessness and charm.

“I see. Well in that case...” The manager moved over to a machine on a counter to one side of the space. “Let me get you a card for his room. Number 316.” He swiped a plastic card through a magnetizer. “Here you go.”

Ian got on his cell phone and muttered into it while she gifted the manager with her best smile and gushed, “Thanks so much. I owe you huge. Now if you’ll excuse us, time really is of the essence.”

“Of course.”

Piper was surprised when their FBI driver strode into the lobby. He engaged the manager in conversation, thanking the guy for his help and writing down his name for some sort of commendation.

The elevator door closed behind her and Ian. “What’s up with our FBI escort?”

“He’s watching the manager to make sure he doesn’t call up and warn Abahdi that we’re coming.”

Ahh. She wouldn’t have thought of that.

“Nice work, sweet talking the manager. That’s what I was talking about when I said you should use your gender to help you.”

“Don’t piss me off, McCloud.”

“Only time you’re not pissed off is when you’re having screaming orgasms in my arms,” he muttered as the door opened.

He timed that comment intentionally so she couldn’t respond. Bastard.

“I’ll go first,” he breathed.

She shook her head sharply. “No. Let me go first. Abahdi’s a Middle Eastern man. In his world, women aren’t threats. He won’t pull out a weapon and make this a shootout of it if I go first.”

Ian looked dubious for a second and then nodded in decision. She lifted a stack of towels off a cleaning cart they passed and covered her handgun with the white terry cloth squares. At her nod, Ian eased the key card into the lock and turned the knob smoothly. He held the door open for her and stood back as she walked forward.

“Mr. Tariq? I brought you and your daughter more towels—“

Abahdi leaped to his feet as she moved quickly into the room.

She turned the folded towels so he could see the black, round bore of her pistol and spoke quietly, soothingly even. “I urgently need to speak with you, Mr. Tariq. Perhaps we can step out into the hall and let your daughter sleep?” Salima was passed out across one of the beds with a blanket pulled over her.

Abahdi’s gaze shifted to the window, back to her gun, to the open door, and back again. “Please. I mean you and Salima no harm. I just want to talk.” To that end, and to gain his cooperation, she lowered the towel-covered gun. Of course, her target didn’t know how quickly she could fire it from her hip or that she could hit a two-inch target at twenty feet every time when firing from her side.

The Palestinian nodded reluctantly. He stepped out into the hall and Ian moved away from the wall, flanking him. “If you’ll come with us, Mr. Abahdi, we have a few questions for you,” Ian murmured in Arabic.

Yusef stiffened sharply. Tried to turn around. But it was too late. Piper pressed her weapon lightly into his ribs. Ian took the man by the arm and led him into a room a maid was cleaning.

The maid looked up, startled, from making a bed and Ian jerked a thumb at the door. She scuttled out.

“Sit down, Yusef.” Ian planted a chair in the middle of the open space in front of the window.

The Palestinian sat. His facial expression was calm. He was completely at peace with what he’d done. There wasn’t even a hint of fear—or madness—in his steady, intelligent gaze.

This was a true fanatic of the worst kind. He believed all the way down to the bottom of his soul in his cause. He *knew* he had God and Right on his side. Nothing they could say or to do him was going to sway him from that certainty.

She made brief eye contact with Ian and headed back for Abahdi’s room to search for the vials of virus samples. She poked around quietly, and it was quickly apparent that the virus wasn’t there. As she’d expected.

Piper made a quick cell phone call. “The virus is not here. We need an FBI agent in here to babysit Salima Abahdi. She’s asleep in Room 316. If you have an Arabic speaker experienced with kids, send that agent in. In the meantime, a search of the hotel would be in order. Not that I expect to find the virus here. This guy won’t go on vacation with his daughter anywhere near that stuff.”

“Roger, ma’am.”

In under a minute, a man in a suit knocked quietly on the door.

“Babysitter?” she murmured.

The agent nodded and she thanked him as she slipped out. “We’ll be down the hall.”

Ian sat on the bed in front of Abahdi as she entered the room. He ordered her quietly, “Close the door.”

She turned in time to hear Ian ask pleasantly, “Where’s the virus, Yusef?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about—“

“Sure you do. The three coolers you carried out of the house in South Sudan a few days ago. You loaded them in a Land Rover with Salima and drove away while those two Americans stuck around to burn the place down.”

Abahdi gaped.

“Remember all those poor girls in the body bags in the basement? Their eyeballs blood red and staring at you as you worked in your lab?”

Fear flickered in Yusef’s eyes for a second only to be replaced by stony resolve.

Crap. He was going to stonewall them.

Piper stepped forward. “Your wife. Marta was her name, yes? I’m so sorry for your loss. What a horrible tragedy. And for your daughter to witness it...so sad. I lost my mother when I was very young. It’s a terrible blow to a child. I don’t know if Salima could survive losing you, too.”

The resolve cracked just a little.

Following her lead, Ian asked quietly, “Where’s the virus?”

He shook his head. “It is done. God is great and has answered my prayers.”

Crud. What did that mean? “I saw your lab, Dr. Abahdi. Read your notes. Most impressive. Engineering a virus like you did with the equipment you had available...that was world-class work. But here’s the thing. My government needs to know where the virus went. And I’m afraid Uncle Sam isn’t going to take no for an answer.”

He shrugged. “Giving the Great Satan an answer at this point is meaningless.”

She glanced over at Ian, and his eyes were black with worry. Yup, he read this guy the same way she did. The virus had already been released. *Mother of God.*

Tamping down on her panic, she asked as calmly as she could manage, “I’m fascinated by your work. Can you tell me a little about it? Were you able to modify the incubation times along with combining spread vectors and lethality factors?”

Abahdi just looked at her. His pain was so deep, so crystallized, she could see it in every pore of his skin, every hair on his head.

She spoke solemnly. “I understand your rage. I accept it. I will not shake you from your course. You are bent on dying...and so you shall. But are you willing to sacrifice your daughter to have your revenge as well?”

Ian’s gaze snapped to her and then back to their prisoner, measuring, testing her assessment. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to see that this guy was totally committed to avenging his wife’s death. He had nothing else to live for. Except *maybe* the daughter.

Abahdi pressed his lips more tightly together.

“Really?” Anger crept into Piper’s voice. “You’re going to throw away your own child’s life, too? My father might have been a crazy sonofabitch with extreme political beliefs, but he never would have sacrificed me and my brother. You’ll never see Salima again. We’ll raise her to hate you and everything you stood for with all her being.”

With every word, more fury infused Piper’s voice. “We’ll turn her into your worst nightmare, Yusef. Is that what you want for your daughter? For her to know that your revenge was more important to you than her *life*?”

By the end of her tirade, she was battering at Yusef emotionally, pouring out rage and grief at him she didn’t even know until then she had inside herself.

The man had the good grace to look at least a little taken aback. For a few seconds. But then that diamond-hard resolve glittered in his stare once more.

Rage literally poured off the man. It disturbed the air around him like heat devils in the desert. If she reached out with her hand, she would be able to touch it. Feel it. His fury was so palpable, it had taken on a life of its own. It writhed around Abahdi like a sycophantic serpent.

It was arguably one of the most frightening things she’d ever seen. Here was a man of intelligence and resolve, a man of action. And he was motivated by so much rage that murdering thousands or millions of innocent civilians was a shrugging matter to him.

She looked into his eyes for signs of the monster within him, for surely Satan himself had consumed this man’s soul. But instead of the Beast, she saw only a man. A self-satisfied man. She might even call that expression one of smug satisfaction. He was not a reasonable man. He was a fanatic. Lost to them. Furthermore, the man was convinced he’d already gotten his revenge.

Which made her blood run cold. What had he done? There was very little she would put past this man and his invisible cloak of rage.

Ian picked Yusef up by his shirt front and the man did not resist. It was almost as if he welcomed violence. Ian snarled from a range of about four inches, “Where is it, Yusef?”

“Go to hell, Yankee pig.”

Ian flung Abahdi back down into the chair. “I’m not going to give you the satisfaction of losing my temper and burying my fist in your face. You’re not worth it. But you’re done, Abahdi. It’s over.”

The Palestinian laughed. “Oh, no, American. You are wrong. It is just beginning. The wrath of God is coming for you. For all of you.” Abahdi’s laughter changed in pitch. Took on a maniacal quality as it turned into a cackle of encroaching madness. No doubt about it. He’d already turned the virus loose.

“Sir?” An FBI type appeared in the doorway. “Everything okay in here?”

“Take him. He’s yours,” Ian snapped. “This is positively Yusef Abahdi. Take his kid into custody, too. Use her as necessary to break this sonofabitch. Drug him or water board him or whatever you do to people like him to make him sing like a bird. Find out where the virus is.”

The FBI agent spoke into a microphone in the collar of his shirt, and faster than Piper could believe, a half-dozen FBI agents rushed into the room, cuffed the Scientist, and hauled him out.

A few moments later, the agent who’d been left with Salima passed by the open door, carrying the child down the hall wrapped in a blanket, still sleeping peacefully. God knew, that peace would be shattered when the little girl awoke. But at least she got one last night of sweet dreams before her life went the rest of the way to hell.

Ian got on his phone and made a quick report to his boss. He pocketed the device grimly. “HQ says to find the virus ASAP.”

She replied heavily, “I think the virus will announce itself soon enough.”

He nodded. “If we can give the government and health care system any kind of a head start on knowing where to mass their resources, lives will be saved.”

They headed outside, where an army of police cars and government vehicles had gathered, filling the parking lot silently in the gathering dusk with dozens of flashing lights. Ian commandeered a vehicle from the FBI contingent, and she and Ian pulled away from the garish scene.

“Where to, now?” she asked.

Ian was grim. “I don’t know. But I need some quiet to think this through, and it was a zoo back there.”

She talked through what they knew of Abahdi aloud. “Somewhere between South Sudan and Los Angeles, Yusef dropped off the virus. I got the definite impression he turned it loose, himself. My gut says we’re not looking at a middleman.”

“Someone paid for that house, the lab equipment inside,” Ian commented.

“And paid for the girls he gathered virus samples from,” Piper added. “Fatima said El Noor was paid to find those girls and ship them south. Yusef didn’t have the resources to do all of that on his own.”

“Okay. So there’s somebody financing Yusef, but Abahdi turned the virus loose personally. Are we agreed on that?”

“Yes. He was far too smug back at the hotel. He got his revenge in person. And his rage was such that he would have insisted on doing it himself.”

“Odds are he flew from Africa to South America off the radar, literally and figuratively,” Ian speculated. “Which means he came into U.S. airspace from the south.”

Piper shook her head. “The government has excellent radar coverage of U.S. airspace. He came in very low on a small drug plane, which I don’t see him doing with those big coolers and with his daughter. Or, he drove across the border.”

Ian took up the thread. “He could have come in by boat, which opens up all the east coast cities as targets, too. He either attacked someplace in South America, which I highly doubt, since he took great pleasure in calling me a pig, or we’re looking at a U.S. city as his target.”

“He said the wrath of God is coming. I read that to imply a big population has been targeted. Which means a big city.”

Ian called Alex to see if a money trail on Yusef had been identified yet. Piper crossed her fingers, but as Ian listened to Alex, he shook his head in the negative. Rats. They were back to square one. The United States was a big place with a lot of large cities, every one of them a potential target.

“Ideas?” Ian asked. “I’m open to wild-ass guesses at this point. We’ve got no time, and I’ve got no idea how to proceed from here.”

“You don’t think the FBI will get him to talk?” she responded.

“No way. I’ve questioned guys like him before. He’ll die under the most extreme torture without a peep. He’ll lose himself in a fanatical religious hallucination.”

“What if they drug him?” she asked hopefully.

“Chemicals aren’t nearly as effective as everyone would like to think. With enough willpower and a little madness, he can defeat drug-induced questioning or at least side-track it. And he only has to hold out a few days. Just until the outbreak occurs.”

Outbreak. The word resonated like a death knell through her. Thousands of people sickened and dying from a horrendous viral attack that she’d stopped Ian from preventing. Had Ian not been forced to rush in to that burning house to save her, he’d have been able to stop the Scientist from loosing his killer virus, or at least he could have tracked the guy and known where the virus was about to strike. When the dust of this catastrophe settled, all fingers were going to point at her.

This was her fault.

Ian stretched out a cramp beneath the camo netting draped over him and Piper and then settled back into place on the mountainside above the PHP compound. Coming to Idaho was a long shot, but what else did they have to go on?

It all came back to the money. Two seemingly unrelated players—Abahdi and the PHP guys—had abruptly come into windfalls of cash. Both players seemed to be using it for nefarious, yet to be determined, purposes. Maybe each group’s goals

were related, maybe not. But they had nothing else to go on.

If Abahdi could be made to talk, the FBI was certainly the bunch to do it. In the meantime, he and Piper were going to pick up the PHP thread of this whole puzzle and see where it led them.

Like he said. A long shot.

More like a Hail Mary.

The PHP compound across the valley was as private and closed off as Piper had described it. A tall, crude wall made of logs like an Old West fort surrounded the cluster of cabins and gardens. Beyond the wall, several metal pole barns looked like a car and tractor repair set-up.

He and Piper had been parked here for hours, and except for the lazy swirl of wood smoke from a few chimneys, they'd yet to see a single movement of interest. The weight of time ticking by lay heavy upon his shoulders. Memory of those dead girls staring out of their plastic bags still made his skin crawl. He didn't even want to think about thousands of people dying the same way.

"These guys nocturnal, or what?" he muttered to Piper.

"Nope. Just quiet. I told you that before."

"You weren't kidding," he retorted. "Walk me through what goes on in each building, again."

She was able to name who lived in most of the cabins and pointed out the community building, barn, and equipment shed. He was right—the pole barns were a shop facility.

"What about that big building over there?" He pointed at the farthest building beyond the others.

"That one's new since the last time I was here. I honestly don't know."

"So, if the PHP is doing something new, it's likely to be contained in that new building."

She shrugged. "I highly doubt they're building a nuclear bomb in there if that's what you mean."

"You know these guys really well. How long have you been watching them?"

She shrugged, her shoulder lifting against his. "I've kept tabs on them for a while."

"Why these guys? They're a pretty obscure little group."

"Until they went to Khartoum," she replied sourly.

"After dark, let's go down and have a look in that new building," he suggested.

Horror crossed her face. "Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. Something has changed with these guys. That's the one physical feature that has changed recently. Let's check it out. It's not like they'll have pressure pads and laser beams guarding the place."

"I can't agree to this plan. It's dangerous and it'll tip off the PHP that we're watching them."

She couldn't agree? "I'm not asking your permission, Piper."

"And why's that? I'm the expert on these guys, not you. I should be the one making the call, and I say we stand off and watch them for a day or two."

"We don't have a day or two for leisurely surveillance on these guys. Tick tock, baby. Tick tock."

"I know we're on a short clock. But you're underestimating them. Which is irresponsible."

"Not at all," he ground out. "It's called taking a calculated risk. The time crunch demands that we move this investigation along. And if you don't have the *cahones* to take a chance in the field, go home. I'll handle this on my own."

She threw up her hands. "Oh, now we're getting to the heart of the matter. You don't like having me out here! You want to do this alone and get all the glory for yourself!"

He rolled onto his side to stare at her. "I beg your pardon?"

If she seriously thought he did this job for glory, then she didn't know him in the least. Yes, he took deep satisfaction in his work, and he was the first guy to appreciate an attaboy from his boss. But it had always been about doing the right thing, protecting his country and family. It had never been about personal aggrandizement.

"You heard me." Her voice quavered with a little less resolve than before.

"I heard you. I just can't believe what I heard." His voice dropped into a low, dangerous tone. "If you ever accuse me of doing my job for glory again, we're going to have a serious problem." And that was as much of a warning defining his line in the sand as she was going to get out of him.

Piper fell silent. Hopefully, she was digesting his warning and becoming one with it. Eventually, she murmured, "For security, they mostly rely on good old-fashioned guard dogs. Which are not to be underestimated. They'll rip your throat out and are noisy as heck."

He accepted her surrender to his authority out here—and her unspoken apology—with grace. He replied easily, "Dogs are one good bone away from quiet and your best friend. Let's head back to town and pick up some steaks. We can be back here before dark."

"You're nuts."

"I'm a man on a tight schedule. We haven't gotten any texts from my boss, which means Yusef isn't talking. You and I both know that, if he hasn't talked by now, he's not going to talk at all. It's up to us to figure out where he dropped his virus bomb."

And those people down the hill are our best bet at getting an answer.”

Piper was uncharacteristically quiet on the ride back to town. She seemed inordinately ill at ease being back here. Like she’d gone back to her old high school and realized that, as an adult, she no longer fit in.

They picked up a bunch of T-bone steaks and headed back up into the mountains. The PHP compound was actually several miles outside of tiny Elkville, which was little more than a gas station and convenience store. More of an intersection than an actual settlement.

They settled back into their hide as the gloaming settled quietly around them. He commented, “This is my favorite time of day. When the colors have faded to shades of gray and night has not quite fallen.”

“Why?” she asked.

“The quiet, I suppose. Night creatures aren’t out yet, but the day creatures have all headed for home. It’s peaceful.”

“You strike me as the type to enjoy a hot firefight rather than a bucolic twilight.”

“I’m deep. I’ve got layers, kid.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re an onion. Layers and layers of smelly onion.”

He chuckled low so the sound wouldn’t carry. There was no wind to rustle the leaves and disguise any sounds they made out here. “We’ll wait till everyone’s asleep, and then we’ll stroll in and take a peek. If you want to catch a power nap, I feel pretty good.”

He leaned back against a mossy tree trunk and peered down at the soft glow of kerosene lamps shining from the PHP cabins. It didn’t look like a terrible life these people lived. Although, he didn’t see how they paid for things like food, clothing, and basic supplies. Maybe that was the purpose of the shop.

Why would a commune of back-to-basics freaks radicalize out of the blue? While he tried to imagine what had changed the PHP, it started to rain. Piper scooted further under the tarp he’d rigged like a porch roof overhead. He gathered her against his side, and she snuggled in, more asleep than awake. She was warm as she threw an arm across his middle. Comfortable. The two of them fit one another.

Physically, at least. She was secretive and prickly when she was fully conscious and carried around a hell of a chip on her shoulder. She didn’t need to. She was good at her job, and other than needing to dial back the risks she took, a decent surveillance operative. If he had a year to train her, he could turn her into a top-flight operative.

Rain pattered down on the plastic tarp, and full night settled softly around them. It was most relaxed he’d been since he’d spotted a sniper scope staring back at him on a rooftop in Khartoum. Which was odd, given the crisis they were up against. Piper had that effect on him when she wasn’t driving him crazy.

He let her sleep for almost three hours before waking her gently with a kiss at her hairline. The rain had stopped, and the last light had winked out in the compound. “Hey, sleepyhead,” he murmured. “It’s almost midnight. By the time we make our way down to the fence, it’ll be time to rock and roll.”

“I’m telling you. This is a bad idea.”

“Honey, this is what I do for a living. I slide in and out like a ghost. No noise, no fuss, no one the wiser that I’ve been there.”

“Don’t underestimate these guys—“ she started.

“It’ll be fine.”

She huffed and rose to her feet. “Lead on, General Custer.”

He grinned and gave her a hand signal to zip her lip and head out. She wasn’t a trained infiltrator like he was. This stuff was his specialty, however.

The first dog to bark a short, sharp warning was rewarded immediately with a nice chunk of steak, and more importantly with the bone that would take the beast an hour or more to gnaw through. Ian waited for Kujo to get completely engrossed in his treat before moving onward, right up next to his target building.

What the hell was Piper so tense about? These guys had no roving night guard, no electronic security, and a dog. Piece of cake—

Oh, shit. A pack of a half-dozen dogs rushed around the corner without warning, barking their heads off. Working frantically, he threw out steaks so everybody could have something to chew on. They had maybe ten minutes before the dogs finished eating and loud doggie arguments started breaking out over the bones.

He signaled Piper to follow him fast. He moved to the big garage door in the back of the metal building. The padlock was an annoyance, but he picked his way through it soon enough. They had maybe five minutes to look around and get out.

Tension radiated off of Piper out of all proportion to this simple little B&E. Was she really that inexperienced? What had her boss been doing sending her to Sudan to watch anyone?

He oiled the tracks of the door as high as he could reach on both sides with a can of lubricant. He eased the door open about eighteen inches and signaled her to hold it for him. He laid down flat on his belly and took a look inside. Small tires in a tricycle configuration made him frown. No tractor had wheels like that.

More to the point, he didn’t see any boots or signs of humans inside. He signaled an all clear to Piper and rolled under the

door. He held it for her and waved her inside, as well. She stood up while he eased the door back down to the ground.

He made a quick circuit of the big, open space. It was ringed with tools, spare parts, and a general layer of grease that declared it a shop. But what he couldn't make sense of was the small, high-winged airplane sitting in the middle of the space. What did a bunch of folks like the PHP want with an *airplane*?

Piper looked thunderstruck as she trailed him around the space. When he'd determined the building was clear, he muttered, "Does this compute?"

She shook her head emphatically in the negative.

"Have they got an airplane mechanic among them?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"They working on it for income?"

"It has been a while since I've peeked at their books. They never had a lot of cash, but they weren't in dire straits the last time I checked. Their capital costs are pretty low. They own this property outright and don't use utilities. Taxes are way low out here."

He moved over to the airplane, which would normally be a six-seater. But a glance inside showed both rows of rear passenger seats had been removed. In fact, the seats sat off to one side of the hangar on the floor. Something bulky and oblong filled the floor of the rear area of the plane.

He reached for the pilot's door handle.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Finding out what's under that tarp in the back of the plane."

She scowled at him as he slipped into the cramped cockpit and maneuvered onto his knees on the pilot's seat. He lifted the tarp and swore. "You gotta look at this," he muttered.

He lifted the tarp enough for her to peer through the window, and for good measure, he shined his flashlight on what looked like a giant motor underneath. The kind kids built in school with an oversized coil of copper wire wrapped around a central core.

"What on earth?" she breathed.

What were the PHP doing with a complicated electronic device inside a freaking airplane? Color him confused—

--A dozen flashlights pointed at the airplane all at once, and the distinctive chink of shotgun shells being chambered froze Ian on his knees in the seat. He let the tarp slip from his fingers unobtrusively and drop back over the device.

"I told you," Piper commented in a regular speaking voice.

"Out of the plane! Hands behind your head! Move nice and slow or I'll feed you to the dogs in little pieces."

The guy didn't sound like he was kidding. Ian reviewed the infiltration step by step in his head trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. Did these guys actually have some sort of electronic surveillance system after all? He hadn't even bothered to check for one. But if they were harboring a high-tech airplane loaded with some sort of complex motor, who knew what other technology they might be using.

He could kick himself for being so sloppy.

Rough hands shoved him onto his belly on the cold, concrete floor and frisked him thoroughly.

The voice that had yelled at him before ordered, "Light some lanterns."

In a few seconds, a trio of lanterns flared to life, sending a faint, propane-scented hiss into the night.

"What the hell?" the man's voice exclaimed.

From beside him Piper said in a small voice, "Hi, Daddy."

Ian's head whipped up off the concrete toward her.

Daddy? *Daddy?*

Her father was a member of the PHP? Someone shoved his head back down, but not before he got a good look at "Daddy." Sonofabitch. It was Joseph Brothers himself, founder of the damned group. Brothers. Roth. B-Roth-ers. Son of a bitch.

His mind raced. No wonder she'd known so bloody much about this group. No wonder she'd spotted the threat when no one else had ever head of these guys. And no wonder she'd been so damned interested in finding out what her *father* was up to in Sudan. Jesus H .Christ.

Could she be trusted? Was she one of these extremists? She'd been all hot and bothered to prove she was as good as one of the boys—was that all about gaining acceptance into the ranks of these nutballs?

What had she told the PHP about her mission...or his? About him? Had she managed to tip off her father that the two of them were coming when he'd been in the store buying steak? It would explain how easily they'd been spotted, tonight.

"Who'd you bring home with you, Pipes?" one of the others asked.

"That's Ian. I told him we wouldn't be able to sneak in here without getting caught, but he just had to try."

"Who the hell are you, Ian?" Brothers growled.

"I guess I should say, 'Hi, Dad,' too. Piper and I got married a few months back."

He caught her gasp since she was lying right next to him, but he prayed the others hadn't. She turned her head to stare at him intently. God, he could see the wheels turning in her head.

Moment of truth. Would she back up his legend, or roll on him and give him up to her family? He stared at her grimly in the flickering light, awaiting her next move.

She extended her hand to grab his and give it a squeeze. "Can we please get up off the floor? It's cold."

Dammit, what was she going to do? Go along or give him up? He was hoisted to his feet, and to buy time he made a production of brushing himself off. He looked over at her expectantly. This was either going to go very well or very badly in the next few seconds.

Piper took a step closer to him and slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. "Dad, this is Ian Smith, your new-son-in-law. Ian, meet my father, Joseph Brothers."

He breathed a partial mental sigh of relief. Now for the second hurdle. Would Daddy Dearest buy it? Brothers stared at him hard, like he was examining the interior of Ian's soul, for a long minute.

Then, abruptly, Brothers boomed, "Well, let's quit standing around here and get acquainted!"

Piper's hand tightened convulsively around his arm. She was as tense as he was. Of course, the nutballs weren't nearly so likely to blow *her* head off with all those shotguns pointed this way. Speaking of which, the shotguns started parking over shoulders and relaxing along thighs. Praise God. For a minute there, he'd thought they were toast.

Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy. He'd *known* something was weird about Piper and the PHP. His instincts had been shouting it at him from the very beginning, but he'd been so besotted with her in the sack that he'd let sex distract him from digging for the truth.

God, to think he'd almost been done in by a woman. His siblings would laugh their heads off if they ever found out. He'd always been the stoic one. The one who never mixed women and work.

Of course, Piper could still do him in. They weren't clear of this compound, yet. And they still didn't know what the PHP guys had to do with the Scientist. Why had Brothers and his partner-in-crime burned Abahdi's lab down for him?

Piper kept her hand tucked under his arm as they were herded toward the big, central gathering building inside the log fort. Lanterns were lit around the room and embers in the big fireplace stoked to life. Lawn chairs and wooden stools were pulled

into a rough circle in front of the hearth.

“Sit, boy. Tell me about yourself,” Brothers ordered.

Jesus. Their legends weren’t built for this kind of personal interrogation. Ian glanced over at Piper for help. Thankfully, she picked up the ball he lobbed into her court.

She laughed a little as she said, “We met at a firing range.”

“Hell of a shooter, your daughter,” Ian added sincerely. “Did you teach her?”

Brothers leaned back in his chair and stroked his mutton chops while studying Ian shrewdly. “I did. What was she shooting?”

Ian glanced sidelong at Piper and caught her infinitesimal nod out of the corner of his eye. “As I recall, it was a modified Sig 550 sniper rig.”

“Still target shooting, are you, Pipes?” Brothers asked.

“I won a couple of competitions last year,” she replied. “Ian’s a decent shot, too.”

He allowed his mental snort to escape his throat. Decent? He was a military sniper, for god’s sake.

“Oh yeah? What do you shoot?” His father-in-law skewered him with a sharp stare.

“Pretty much anything, sir.”

Silence reigned as Brothers scowled at him. The fire crackled gently as the newly added wood started to catch fire.

God, this was awkward. The man was no doubt sitting there picturing all the filthy things Ian was doing to his daughter in bed. Worse, the man would not be wrong. This was exactly why Ian had no interest in getting married for real. His own family was hassle enough. He bloody well didn’t need to inherit more nosy relatives.

“What are your political beliefs?” Brothers fired at him.

Holy shit. Loaded question. “Pretty conservative, I guess. Piper’s told me a little about the Patrick Henry Patriots.”

“She tell you we have horns on our heads and belong in rubber rooms?”

“Not in so many words, sir,” Ian answered dryly.

Brothers laughed heartily. Without warning, though, he waxed serious. Intense. “Why’d you break into my shop, boy?”

Ian shrugged. “To see if I could do it. Piper said you guys had pretty sharp security. I didn’t think a guy like you would be too impressed by some stranger knocking politely on your front door to let you know I had married your baby girl. I figured you’d want to know I was man enough to be part of the family.”

That made Brothers leaned back hard in his chair and stroke his mutton chops furiously. Eventually, the man looked over at Piper. “Never thought you’d marry a man like me. Thought you’d go for some military asshole who swallows the government’s propaganda and spouts it back like a robot.”

Ian schooled his jaw to relax, his expression to stay open.

“Oh, he can be an asshole from time to time,” she muttered.

Brothers laughed. “Doesn’t let you push him around, huh?” The man’s gaze lit on him. “Good for you, son.”

He’d been upgraded from boy to son. He hoped that was a good sign.

“What do you do for a living?” Brothers demanded.

“Mechanic,” he answered, sticking to the legend the analyst had created for them. Less chance of him and Piper getting their story wires crossed that way. “Diesel engines, mostly.” The diesel detail had been Piper’s idea. Tractors used the old-fashioned engines and were slightly less unacceptable to the PHP than modern, electronic, fuel-injected vehicles.

He shrugged. “I also like to hunt. Do some fishing. I carve a little in my spare time. Not that Piper leaves me much time for that. Always seems to have a list of stuff for me to do.”

The entire group of men laughed at that. Honey Do lists were universal, apparently.

Piper scowled on cue, and said, “It’s getting late. Can we bed down here, tonight, or should we head back to town?”

“Where you staying?” her father asked.

“We grabbed a cabin at the Trout Camp.”

“Might as well throw down a sleeping bag, here. We can talk more, tomorrow. Get to know Ian, here.” So. Brothers didn’t entirely trust him, yet. Good instincts, the guy had. Didn’t completely the buy the story of why they’d broken in to the compound. Ian’s own instincts said the guy was buying time. Delaying them. Why? What was on the verge of happening that he and Piper had to be kept out of the way of?

She’d had a good idea trying to talk them out of the compound like that. Although frankly, he would’ve been suspicious if Brothers had let them go so easily.

Sleeping bags were brought for the two of them to bunk down in front of the fire in here, overnight. Ian endured a few ribs about the bags zipping together and caught a scowl from his “father-in-law” over the jokes.

Jeez. Did all men go through this when they married the daughter of some redneck with a shotgun? It was a wonder anyone married those poor girls.

Brothers left them a lantern with a gruff, “Don’t sleep with the Devil, Piper.” And the two of them were left alone.

Ian visually scanned the room for surveillance measures but spotted nothing. He extinguished the lantern, and they duly

crawled into their double sleeping bag by the dim light of the fire. He held his arm out in invitation, and she snuggled up against his side.

“We being watched?” he murmured against her temple.

“Not electronically, but maybe.”

“You sure they’re not using electronic surveillance? When we were lying on the floor, I think I saw motion detectors and pressure pads in the shop.”

“Really?” She started to push up on his chest to stare down at him, but he used his hand to anchor her shoulder and hold her down.

“What did your father mean by that last comment about not sleeping with the devil?”

“Favorite saying of his. Sometimes you have to sleep with the Devil if you want to catch him.”

“A cheery bedtime thought,” he muttered. Interesting. The guy thought that sometimes you had to do what you were opposed to for the sake of a greater goal? Ian filed that away for later analysis.

“We need to get out of here,” Piper breathed from behind unmoving lips. “He doesn’t trust you.”

“He doesn’t trust you, either,” Ian replied.

He felt her sigh against his side. Now was not the time to rail against her for failing to reveal her personal connection to this mission. Uncle Sam was gonna have her head—and her job—on a platter for it when they got back to Washington. Too bad. She had real potential as a field observer. Assuming she could learn not to involve herself in local events.

“We should head out sooner rather than later,” she commented. “They’ll expect us to wait until just before dawn to leave. I’d suggest we give everyone a half-hour to settle down and then we split.”

“Why will they expect a pre-dawn escape?” he queried.

“Lot of these guys are ex-military. It’s when most military types would make the attempt.”

It was, indeed, when he would have tried it. His training taught that people’s body rhythms were at their lowest in the pre-dawn hours, and most people would be deeply asleep at that time. Those who’d tried to stay awake would be at their least alert and fighting off an urge to nod off.

He set a silent alarm on his cell phone to vibrate him awake in a half hour, and Piper did the same. A power nap never hurt in the middle of an op. Except, when he closed his eyes, his mind drifted back to the object he’d seen under the tarp in the back of that airplane. That large magnetic coil had been connected to a motor of some kind. An electro-magnet, then. There had been something inside the coil, but he hadn’t been able to take a good look at it before Brothers and company had burst in.

What could these guys be doing with a large electro-mag—

--It hit him like a ton of bricks. *Ho. Lee. Shit.*

That was an electro-magnetic pulse generator. The concept was simple. Explode a small bomb inside a magnetic field, and a giant wave of energy would propagate outward. Said wave would be electro-magnetic in nature and wipe out all electrical objects in its path. Generators, televisions, phones, computers, toasters, anything using electrical current would be fried. As in destroyed. Permanently unusable.

Of course. These guys wanted to take America back to the nineteenth century. How better to do that than by wrecking all modern technology? Cripes. He had to get another look at that bomb. See how powerful it was. Hell, disable it.

He lay tense and still beneath Piper as she napped on his chest. Where were they planning to detonate this bomb of theirs? With a small airplane, they could fly it just about anywhere in the United States. And if they happened to explode their bomb while airborne, the pulse would travel line of sight for miles. That one device could wipe out a big chunk of a major city.

A suicide bomber? Was one among them? Or would they remote-pilot the plane? The technology was available to turn a plane into a drone easily enough.

His silent alarm vibrated against his hip, and Piper jerked awake beside him. He breathed in her ear, “Arrange your sleeping bag so it looks like you’re still in it, then follow me. We’re going back to the shop to have another look at that airplane’s cargo.”

Piper stiffened and whispered back, “We have to get out of here.”

“After that.”

“But—“

“No arguments. We have to do this, even if we get caught again.”

“If they catch us in there again, they’ll shoot us.”

His response was grim. “So be it. Consider this an order. Life or death. I’ll explain later.” Thankfully, she nodded and made no further protest even though the expression in her eyes was doubtful.

They worked in silence, bunching up their sleeping bags and lacing on their boots quietly. She hand-signaled that she was ready to go, and he headed for the window least back-lit by the fireplace. He oiled the wooden jamb and eased it open. They climbed out the window quickly, rolling to the ground to scan the area around them. No movement. No reaction to their escape. At least not yet. He reached up to ease the window shut and signaled Piper to follow him.

He led the way behind several cabins toward the big shop building. The dogs didn’t show themselves, and he didn’t go

looking for them. This time when he broke into the shop, he operated on the assumption that there were silent alarms and electronic surveillance. He found the main incoming electrical feed, disabled it, and waited in the bushes behind the building for a good ten minutes to see if anyone would react to the loss of power.

Since no men with guns showed up, he gathered that their security was not so sophisticated that a power interruption would trigger an alarm. He jimmied open the small window in the back wall and, again, waited for a response. Nothing. He indicated that Piper should stay outside and stand watch while he infiltrated the shop.

As he slithered through the window, he contemplated that this was the first time a woman had ever had his back on an infil mission.

Not just any woman. Piper. Did he trust her? She hadn't revealed to anyone in the government who her family was, what her connection to the PHP was. It wasn't exactly a lie to have omitted the truth, but it cast serious doubt on her motives.

Even if she did betray him, he had no choice but to go forward with this maneuver. No way could he leave an operational EMP weapon sitting in the hands of dangerous nutballs. He gained his feet inside the hangar and froze, checking for telltale signs of motion detectors or other security measures that might still be operational. Avoiding the rubber mats on the floor that might be hiding pressure plates, he moved quickly to the airplane. The pilot's door was still unlatched from before, and he reached for it just as a silhouette briefly appeared in the window he'd used.

He reached for his sidearm before he recognized the lithe shape of Piper joining him.

"I told you to stay outside," he whispered tersely.

"It'll go faster in here with two of us. What are we looking for?"

Irritation raged through him, but the damage was already done. She was already inside. "Search the cockpit for anything that might indicate where they're planning to fly this bird to."

She nodded, and he climbed into the back, straddling the bomb. He ducked under the tarp with the bomb and turned on his flashlight. Shielding it heavily with his hand, he let a small beam of light trickle down on the device. Bundles of dynamite nestled inside the copper coil of the electromagnet. He had to disable this thing. But in a way the PHP wouldn't see and repair before they tried to detonate it.

He carefully unscrewed the housing covering the detonation circuit board, timer and trigger. Using the tip of his knife, he carefully detached the wires between the three components. He reattached them randomly, leaving out a couple of vital connections that would complete the circuits. When all the wire ends had a home, he replaced the housing and screwed it back in place. Good Lord willing, the bomb's maker would not recheck the wiring closely before trying to explode it.

He turned around in the cramped space to where Piper was searching the passenger side map pocket built into the door. "Find anything?" he breathed.

She shrugged.

He hand signaled her to ask if she was ready to go. She nodded and crawled out of the aircraft. Moving quickly now that their primary mission was accomplished, he darted to the window. A quick peek outside. Clear. Out he went. Piper landed lightly beside him. He paused just long enough to close the window and then headed for the woods. He took the lead, moving cautiously, testing for trip wires and booby traps with each step. It was slow going, but he'd learned his lesson with these guys. Better safe than sorry.

Eventually, they made it up and over the log wall, and the compound disappeared from sight in the trees behind them. He disciplined himself to continue moving carefully until they'd topped the big ridge well beyond the compound and off the PHP property.

Finally, he stopped and turned to face Piper. He had a thousand questions for her, but they still had to wait until they were completely away from here.

"We're clear," he said in a low voice that would only carry a few feet. "Our truck's off to the east about a half-mile."

"Want me to take point?" she asked.

"Nah. I'm good. Just don't let anyone sneak up on us from behind."

"I've got rear guard," she affirmed.

Did she? Really? He had to play this thing out and wait for her to turn on him. His shoulder blades twitched ominously as he headed out.

It took nearly an hour to reach the vehicle through the brush and heavy terrain, but if she was planning to betray him, Piper had another moment in mind, apparently. He breathed a sigh of relief as he started the truck and drove off into the darkness. Once he'd put several miles between them and the PHP, he finally turned on his headlights.

They turned onto a paved road and he accelerated away from the compound, gripping the steering wheel tightly. He glanced over at Piper who was staring fixedly out her window. As tempted as he was to demand answers from her, he needed to wait until they were stopped somewhere. Somewhere he could detain her. Arrest her, even, if she gave him the wrong answers.

They drove for several hours, and he stopped only when they reached Fairchild Air Force Base on the outskirts of Spokane, Washington. He flashed his military ID and was given a visitor's pass to the base, which was the home of Aircrew Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape Training. He headed directly for the advanced prisoner interrogation facility. It was

a non-descript building on the outside. Inside, he knew it to be equipped with state-of-the-art interrogation equipment...which he prayed he would not need to use on Piper.

Frowning, she followed him into the unmarked building. He pulled the desk guard aside and had a brief, muttered conversation with the guy out of Piper's hearing. A few phone calls were made, and in a few minutes, he and Piper were led to a soundproof room with no surveillance cameras. He ushered her inside, followed her in, and locked the door behind himself.

He said grimly, "Have a seat. We need to talk."

Piper gulped. The odd acoustics of the padded walls were familiar to her. She would never forget the advanced interrogation techniques that had been part of her CIA training in Virginia. She'd known this moment was coming ever since she'd uttered the words, "Hi, Daddy." But she couldn't stop her knees from knocking together or her teeth from wanting to chatter.

"It's not as bad as it looks," she blurted to Ian.

He perched on the edge of the table bolted to the floor in the middle of the room, and folded his arms, studying her. "How's that?" he asked evenly.

At least he sounded like he was willing to hear her out before he condemned her out of hand. But his eyes were cold. Closed. So unlike the open, generous lover she'd come to know over the past few weeks. Right now, he looked every inch the angry intelligence officer she knew him to be.

"I'm not one of them. I think my father and brother are more than a little crazy and in need of watching. That's why I've been tracking the PHP for the past two years on my own time."

He moved so fast she didn't even have time to react, grabbing her shoulders, lifting her out of the chair and slamming her back against the spongy wall. He snarled in her face, "That's exactly what you would say if you were secretly working with them, infiltrating the government intelligence apparatus to find out what was being said about them, any actions that might be planned against them."

He looked furious. Murderously so. God knew, if he decided to kill her, she wouldn't be able to stop him. He was right about one thing. She would never be the Special Forces soldier that he was. He had eight inches in height and sixty pounds of solid muscle on her.

She answered candidly, "If I had admitted they were my family and that I thought they were nuts, would anyone have taken me seriously?"

Ian's gritted, "Probably not. Without a credible threat from them, you'd have been ignored."

"Hence, I watched them myself and waited for something to change. The minute my dad and brother headed for Sudan, I reported it to my boss."

"But you still didn't tell him who you were, or who they were to you, did you?"

"Well, no."

He flung her away from him and paced a restless circuit around the tiny room.

"How'd you convince André Fortinay to send you after them?" he threw at her.

She held her position carefully, not moving in any way that would provoke the tiger in him to attack her. Smart girl.

"I told André I had a gut instinct that something had changed with the PHP and they were becoming dangerous. Which wasn't a hard idea to sell given that they were headed for Khartoum, the birthplace of many of the world's biggest terrorists. And I wasn't wrong that they're dangerous, was I?"

Ian powered down fractionally. He'd been in the business long enough to know that gut instincts were worth paying attention to. And her gut *had* been right, damn it.

"Why did you lie to me?"

Crap. He was back in her face, possibly even angrier than before, his voice low and charged. "I didn't tell you the whole truth. I never lied to you."

"Don't split hairs with me. You didn't tell me about your association with the PHP. And you damned well should have."

"Would you have trusted me if I had?"

"I fucking don't trust you now!" he burst out. "What has all of this been? A ploy to spy on the government on behalf of your family? Blood's thicker than water, isn't it, Piper?"

Pain sliced through her. If their positions were reversed, she wouldn't trust him, either. "Blood may be thicker than water, but it's not thicker than right and wrong. My family is doing something bad. Really bad. And I'm doing my damndest to stop them. If I hadn't blown the whistle on them, nobody would be watching them. Nobody would have any idea that they're working for a terrorist."

Ian stared hard at her, his hand hovering dangerously near the deadly field knife in its sheath at his hip. "You do realize that every bit of intel you've ever given Uncle Sam on the PHP is now discredited, right?"

"I'm sorry," she tried in desperation. "I should have told you. I should have trusted you. I was wrong."

He was silent, stress tight across his forehead.

"What was that under the tarp?" she asked in a blatant attempt to distract him and diffuse his anger and betrayal. "It looked like a big motor. Why did you insist on going back to have another look at it?"

His jaw tightened and he said nothing.

He wasn't going to answer her? Did he distrust her so much, then? A hot knife of hurt pierced her, startling her. Since when did she care so deeply what he thought about her? They'd hooked up a few times, but that did not a relationship make. Right?

Wrong, a little voice in the back of her head whispered to her.

"Look, Ian. We could stand here and argue all night over whether I should have told you about my relationship to the PHP. The fact is I spotted my father and brother heading to Sudan. And I told the authorities. Now we know they have something to do with Yusef Abahdi. That's more than we would have known had I not been tracking them on the side."

Ian shoved a hand through his hair. Exhaled hard. "You have to tell your boss. You have to let everyone running the op know. Now."

She stared at him in dismay. "Really? Is putting my mistake to rights more important than finding the virus and stopping Yusef from killing thousands of innocents?"

"Your intel is discredited. You *have* to let the analysts know."

But it wasn't discredited, dammit. She'd never been anything but honest and forthright in her reports on the PHP to her boss. She'd collected data and done her level best to be objective...

Okay, Fine. She couldn't technically be classed as objective where her own family members were concerned. Her relationship to the PHP might plausibly have put a slant on the reports, but in no way discredited them outright—

"Make the call." Ian held out his cell phone to her expectantly. She looked up at him in desperation but not even a hint of relenting cracked the granite façade of his expression.

She took the phone. It was five a.m. here on the West Coast, which made it eight a.m. in Washington. André, an early rise, would already be at work.

Silently, despairingly, she typed in André Fortinay's office number. The receptionist patched her through to her boss's desk.

"Hi, André. It's me. I have a confession to make. A big one. And it's going to make you mad..."

Her boss listened in grim silence as she explained her relationship to the PHP. He also listened in silence to her avowals on stacks of bibles that had done her absolute best to be objective, fair, and honest in her reports on the group.

At the end of her monologue, all he said was, "You're off the case."

"Am I fired?"

"To be determined," was her boss's terse response.

"Okay. Fair enough." She sighed heavily. "I'm really sorry."

"Save it. I have bigger problems on my plate at the moment. I'll talk to you when you get back to D.C." The line went dead in her ear.

Oh, that was so not good. André was a European and the soul of courtesy at all times. But the man had just hung up on her. She was dead meat.

Holding out Ian's phone to him, she looked up at him bleakly. "Satisfied? I'm off the case and have undoubtedly lost my job. The career I've dreamed of most of my life is over."

She turned away sharply lest he see the tears gathering in her eyes all of a sudden. She tried the steel door and was dismayed to find it locked.

"If you'll let me out of here, I'll get out of your hair. Good luck, Ian. You've got to find that virus. There's no telling how many people will die if it runs unchecked."

A big hand landed on the door above the latch. His arm stretched disturbingly close to her shoulder, and damned if she couldn't feel his body heat radiating toward her back.

Oh, God. Not only had she lost her career, but she'd also lost *him*. A black pit opened beneath her feet and she gave herself over to it, falling, falling. She'd lost everything. She had nothing--

"Crucify yourself later," Ian growled. "Right now, we have a terrorist attack to stop."

"Didn't you hear me? I'm off the case. Fired. Gone. Security clearances revoked, Need to know erased. I'm *done*." She spared him a single anguished glance over her shoulder, but it was too much. If she looked at him anymore she was going to break down and sob like a baby. And she'd be damned if she cried in front of him. She turned back to the door, yanking futilely

at the immobile latch.

“In the meantime, Americans are dying.” His words pounded at her skull like hammers. “They don’t know it yet, but a whole bunch of innocent civilians have likely got viral time bombs ticking away inside them.”

Did he have a point to make? Frowning, she turned under his arm to face him. The steel door was cold against her back. As unyielding as the man in front of her.

“We’re agreed that the attack has already happened. Yes?” he asked rhetorically. She nodded as she stared at a spot somewhere in the middle of his chest, and he continued grimly. “We’re in damage control mode, then. We need to know where to concentrate medical resources before all hell breaks loose. Which means this is a race against time.”

“I’m aware of all this,” she told him gently. “But it’s not my problem anymore. It’s yours, alone.”

“I need your help, Piper.”

Her stare snapped up to his. He didn’t look demented.

“Come again?” she blurted.

“I need your help. Like it or not, you’re the expert on PHP. You know more about them than anyone else in the intel establishment.”

“But you said it yourself. You can’t trust me. Even if I am telling you the truth to the best of my ability, it’s bound to be skewed to some degree. None of my intel is reliable or actionable.”

“It’s the best we’ve got. And we’re running out of time.”

“André all but fired me.”

“Okay. Then you’ll just ride along with me for lack of any other ride to where you’re headed. You won’t technically be working with me. But I need you to get your head back in the game. Help me figure out where Yusef turned his virus loose. You can sort out your job or lack of one later. But right now, I need you.”

Ian stared hard at her, and she stared back, weighing whether or not he meant any of it. Was this all part of an elaborate interrogation ploy to get her to spill her guts? Thing was, she’d already laid her guts on the table for him. She just didn’t know if he believed her or not.

“Be square with me, Ian. Are you playing me or not? We’ve got no time for this.”

“You’re right. We don’t.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “I don’t make a habit of working with people I don’t trust. But there is no one else. I need you to look me in the eye and swear you’ll be dead honest with me from here on out. No lies. No evasions. About anything. No matter what I ask you, I need the truth to the very best of your ability to give it to me. That’s the only way this is going to work. I can’t work with you if you’re not honest with me.”

She stared at him long and hard. Honest had never been part of her M.O. Ever since she could remember, she’d survived by hiding her true self. By being less like her mother than she really was. By pretending to agree with her father’s brand of madness. By hiding her dreams. Hiding her feelings. Hiding everything about herself.

“Take it or leave it,” he prodded.

She ought to walk away. Let Ian and the government flail through this crisis on their own. But she still felt a responsibility to do the right thing. To atone for stopping Ian from destroying the virus in Sudan. To make up for her family’s crimes. To redeem her own reputation.

She capitulated to that little voice all at once, abruptly, not daring to second guess the impulsive decision. “Fine. I swear to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth from now on,” she blurted.

“Can I believe you?” he challenged.

She shrugged and risked a look up into his eyes. “That’s up to you. I can make you promises all day long, but what matters is how your gut answers that question.”

He made a sound of disgust. And that was the problem with blown trust. Even if she one-hundred-percent kept her promise, he wouldn’t necessarily believe her.

She added soberly, “Even if you don’t believe me, we still have a crisis on our hands. And I still know more about the PHP than anybody on earth who’s not an actual member.”

He swore under his breath. She would take that as an acknowledgment that she was right. He asked heavily, “Did you find anything in the plane to indicate where it might be headed?”

“There were navigation maps of Idaho, Nevada, and southern California,” she answered. “How do those link up with what you found in the back of the plane?”

“Alarming,” he answered dryly. Still not going to tell her what had been under that tarp, huh? She elected not to push him for details just now. He was being pretty prickly at the moment. Maybe later, after she’d restored his trust in her, he’d tell her what he’d seen.

Maybe. He didn’t exactly strike her as the forgiving type.

Ian asked her abruptly, “Did you see anyone in the compound you didn’t recognize? Someone new?”

She thought back to the cluster of men who’d captured her and Ian. “Yes. Tall guy. Dark, full beard. Wore the black parka with the hood. I might have seen him the last time I observed the compound, but he’s the only person I don’t know by name or

recognize on sight.”

“No idea who he is?”

She shook her head. “None.”

“He was the guy who frisked me,” Ian commented. “I thought he might be an ex-cop, given how efficiently he searched me. Too bad we don’t have a picture of him to run through the FBI facial recognition data base.”

She frowned. “I might have one. Last time I was in Idaho, I took a bunch of surveillance pictures of the PHP compound. I might have caught him without realizing it. If he has grown that beard in the last six months or so, I may have him on film and not even know it. I sent all those pictures to Doctors Unlimited before I left for Sudan.”

“Can you call DU? Have the pics sent to the FBI?” Ian asked tersely. “Get the boys there looking for a guy who matches our description and get an ID on him?”

“Yeah, sure.” It took her a few minutes to contact an IT guy at Doctors Unlimited and have him forward the pictures. She pocketed her phone and nodded at Ian. She, too, felt the weight of time slipping by. Somewhere, a lethal virus was incubating. Growing. Coiling like a viper getting ready to strike.

“What the hell is your family up to?” Ian growled as he paced the confines of the room.

If only she knew. *Speaking of family...* “Have you checked in with your brother-in-law recently? Maybe he has picked up a money trail on Yusef.”

Ian shrugged and pulled out his cell phone. He surprised her by putting it on speaker and setting it on the table between them. Alex Peters picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Ian. I was about to call you.”

“You got something for us?” Ian replied quickly.

“Maybe. What can you tell me about El Noor? Did you ever personally see him while you were in Sudan?”

Ian glanced over at her questioningly and she shook her head in the negative. “Neither of us ever saw him. There were a lot of rumors about him, and we saw his guys plenty. They wore black berets and kicked butt whenever they showed up. Why do you ask?”

Alex’s scratchy voice replied, “I did a little digging, well, a lot of digging, actually. I’m not convinced he actually exists. Someone is paying the bills and fronting a group of thugs in Khartoum, but I don’t think there’s any such warlord living in Sudan.”

Piper’s jaw dropped.

“Who is he, then?” Ian asked, sounding as shocked as she felt.

“Good question. The money trail is as sophisticated as anything I’ve ever seen. Shell companies, accounts in tax havens, nesting corporations, the works. This guy doesn’t want anyone to know who he is or where to find him. One thing I know for certain: he’s no garden variety warlord from the slums of Khartoum.”

Piper leaned forward. “So you’re telling us that the PHP guys and Yusef Abahdi are working for someone outside of Sudan who only pretended to be El Noor in Khartoum?”

“That’s the gist of it. El Noor could be anybody. No telling who he wants to target or why.”

Ian interjected, “But we do know the guy is probably financing some sort of terrorist attack in the United States. Probably a biological attack, and probably on a good-sized city.”

Alex answered, “And we know El Noor paid for a helicopter that the PHP took delivery of.”

“What about a small, fixed wing airplane?” Ian asked. “Did El Noor buy one of those for the PHP?”

“What kind of plane?” Alex asked.

Piper supplied, “A Cessna 210.” She rattled off the tail number, adding, “But that number may be a fake.”

Alex sounded distracted as rapid typing fired off behind his voice. “Lemme look into it. I’ll call you back.”

“Roger,” Ian bit out. The call ended.

She stared up at him. “Did you see anything in Khartoum to indicate that El Noor wasn’t real?”

Ian frowned. “There was something...” His voice trailed off. “I’d have to review my scope footage...”

Whoa. His gun sight also recorded video? Her scope hadn’t been anywhere near that high-tech. He picked up the telephone receiver mounted on the wall and asked for a laptop computer to be brought into their room right away.

It took a few minutes to get him connected to the Internet, but in short order after that, Piper sat beside him, shoulder to shoulder, watching him fast forward through video telemetry from Khartoum.

“Here it is,” Ian announced.

She recognized the dusty street. From the angle of the sun that would have been a morning shot. Ian slowed the footage down to normal speed. A group of men in El Noor berets piled out of a Jeep in front of a store and disappeared inside—

“Hey! I recognize that!” she exclaimed. “That’s from the day we met. They dragged out that shopkeeper and beat him to death. You must have taken this footage right before I spotted you.”

“And I spotted you back,” Ian retorted. “Here’s the piece I was looking for.”

She looked at the screen and flinched as one of El Noor’s thugs slammed a rifle butt into the shopkeeper’s skull. “God,

that's violent."

"And efficient. Watch the precision with which these guys kill their target and then pummel his corpse into hamburger."

It was nauseating to witness again, but in spite of feeling sick she leaned forward to watch the attack more closely. Now that he mentioned it, Ian was right. Those guys were military in their precision. Each punch and kick was targeted with incredible efficiency. Minimum effort for maximum damage.

"Is that Krav Maga they're using?" she asked.

"A little hard to tell, since Krav Maga is based on an actively resisting opponent. But that would be my guess," he replied.

"Where did a gang of illiterate Sudanese kids from the slums learn sophisticated Israeli self-defense tactics?" she murmured. A flash of white at one of the attackers' throats caught her attention. "Wait. Go back. What was that?"

"Where?" Ian asked.

"Pause it...right...now." She pointed at the screen. "See there? This attacker's throat is weird. It's white." And it didn't look like a scarf or piece of clothing at the guy's collar.

Ian highlighted the section of the shot and enlarged it. "Lemme see if I can enhance the pixilation on this."

It took a minute for the computer to clarify the rough edges of the screen shot, but when it finished, Ian lurched back hard in his seat while she just stared.

The white patch was skin. Which was to say, the dark skin of the man's face was make-up. The picture showed clearly where the make-up smudged and smeared at the guy's collar, revealing definitely Caucasian skin at the base of his neck.

"Look at his facial features," she breathed. "His bone structure. He looks European, not North African."

"What the hell is El Noor doing, using white guys who know Krav Maga to impersonate a Sudanese street gang?" Ian demanded.

"I guess we have our proof that El Noor is a whole lot more than a Sudanese slum lord."

Ian nodded. "If he can credibly fake an entire street gang, he's fully capable of orchestrating a major terrorist attack."

"Who is he?"

"That's a question for later. Right now, we have to figure out where he's launching his attack."

She stared at him. "Do you think El Noor is pointing Yusef Abahdi and—" her voice hitched a little, "—my father at the same target or at two different targets?"

"Good question." Ian frowned at her, obviously thinking hard. "We think Yusef has already launched his attack. And that airplane looked ready to go, to me. Whatever your...the PHP...is planning seems imminent. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I got the impression your father was trying to delay us. Like he planned to keep us at the compound for a day or two."

"To keep us out of the way while the PHP's attack goes down?" she asked in dismay.

"Or while they finish preparing for it," he added.

"So we're talking hours or days and not weeks until the PHP strikes?"

"Yes, that would be my guess," he answered grimly.

Piper flinched involuntarily but had to agree with him. She picked up Ian's train of thought. "There's a built-in delay to the biological attack while the virus incubates and spreads. Could El Noor be planning another attack, one launched by the PHP to coincide with when the virus starts to go active?"

Ian grimaced. "It's diabolical."

"It would maximize the effectiveness of the biological attack," she replied. Both of them glanced at the still image of the Caucasian street thug frozen on the computer screen.

"El Noor's men seem to prize efficiency. It's probably safe to extrapolate that their boss is the same," Ian said grimly.

They stared at one another in shared dismay. This was not good. Not good at all.

"I gotta call this in," he announced.

While he made the call, her mind raced. Now what? Where was El Noor pointing his two-pronged attack? What American city was in the crosshairs?

Partway through his report, Ian stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him. She winced. Reporting on her connection to the PHP, no doubt. Oh, well. It had been a great career while it lasted.

He stepped back into the room, pocketing his phone.

"Am I officially fired, yet?" she asked in resignation.

"Not that I'm aware of. Why would you ask that?"

She blinked up at Ian. "You told them about my connection to the PHP, didn't you?"

"Nah," he shrugged. "It'll work its way through channels quickly enough. Your boss will tell my boss when the time is right. And at the moment, we've got bigger fish to fry."

She stared at him hard, trying to suss out if he was telling her the truth or not. Or was he just smoothing things over for now so she would spill her guts to him? His expression didn't give away a thing.

She asked in resignation, "Did HQ have any information for us?"

"Did you know your old man has a private pilot's license?" Ian asked abruptly.

“What? No way.”

“Got it a few months ago.”

“You’re kidding,” she blurted.

“And the new guy. The one with the beard. Name’s Matt Bradley. Turns out he’s ex-Army. Chopper pilot.”

“The helicopter the PHP bought,” she exclaimed.

“Why does an anti-technology cult need both a fixed-wing plane and a helicopter?” Ian mused.

“More to the point, what kind of terrorist attacks can be launched from airborne platforms?” she added. “Do you suppose the virus hasn’t been released yet, and they’re planning to use the aircraft to, I don’t know, spray it over a city?”

“Possible. But why would Abahdi go to all the trouble of developing a virus with a lot of spread vectors if all they had to do was spray it on folks? And furthermore, I didn’t see crop dusting gear in the shop or in the plane.”

She frowned. “Look. I know you don’t want to believe me. But I can’t accept that my father and brother would knowingly release a lethal virus on thousands of fellow Americans. They may dislike the government and modern technology, but they consider themselves to be patriots.”

Ian scowled at her but his expression was far away. Eventually, he muttered, “We can’t exactly go back into the PHP compound and search for coolers of killer virus.”

“As far as I know, there’s no refrigeration of any kind in the compound.”

“As far as you knew, there weren’t airplanes and electronic surveillance systems, either,” Ian snapped.

She subsided with a sigh. She wasn’t going to win any argument in which she tried to convince him her family wasn’t a bunch of radical terrorists. “You’re right about one thing. We can’t go back there. They’ll be bristling like a hornet’s nest after we snuck out like that. My dad’s suspicious by nature and no dummy. He knows I’ve been opposed to his views for years, and now he knows I’ve been watching him.”

“I doubt he bought the newlywed story, then. Which means he’ll also suspect that I’m government or law enforcement. Will that provoke him to some even more extreme action?”

She considered his question. “It might move up his timetable, but he’s not prone to knee-jerk reactions. He’s intelligent, organized, and rational.”

“To the extent that driving the United States back into the nineteenth century is rational,” Ian added dryly.

She shrugged. “He won’t panic.”

Ian commented, “For now, let’s operate on the assumption that the worst-case scenario has happened. Let’s assume the virus has already been released. The Centers for Disease Control are on alert and will notify HQ if and when reports of an infection cluster come in to them.”

Silence fell between them, deepened by the soundproof walls.

She asked suddenly, “Ian, did you see any sign of a runway near the PHP compound on the satellite surveillance pictures back in Washington?”

“No!” He grasped her logic instantly. “The plane. How will they get it out of there?”

“It could be put on a truck easily enough and hauled out to an airport. But why go to all that trouble?”

Ian nodded slowly. “They wouldn’t want anyone to see the payload by accident. They build the bomb in their shop and only take the plane out to use it at the last minute.”

“There’s a *bomb* in that plane?” she exclaimed.

“Not exactly.”

“What exactly, then?”

He shook his head at her, and she all but ground her teeth together in frustration. Why wouldn’t he believe that they were on the same side, here? Business. She had to focus on business.

“What about that helicopter?” she asked. “Where is it, now? Should we take a look at it? If an El Noor shell corporation bought it for the PHP, we have to assume it’s part of the larger attack, right?”

“Especially given that the PHP has a guy who can fly it.”

“Okay, then. Where exactly in Nevada did Alex say it was purchased?”

“Lemme call him back.”

In a few seconds, Ian’s future brother-in-law was on the line. “Glad you called, Ian. I’ve got some information for you.”

“Lay it on us.”

“Joseph Brothers, PHP’s founder, got a pilot’s license a few months back.”

“HQ beat you to that punch, buddy,” Ian replied.

“Did they know it was paid for in cash? Or that PHP’s newest member is a guy named Matt Bradley, who left the Army under a Section Eight discharge?”

Piper looked up at Ian sharply. *Wasn’t a Section Eight a psychological discharge?* Ian must have seen the question in her eyes because he nodded and twirled his finger by the side of his head to indicate ‘crazy’.

“Where’s the helicopter the PHP bought, right now, Alex?” Ian asked.

“It was delivered to a regional airport in Overton, Nevada. Perkins Field. That’s about sixty miles northeast of Las Vegas. Last time I checked, it hadn’t been moved.”

“Could that be the target? Las Vegas?” she asked sharply.

“We’re not sure the helicopter has anything to do with that attack,” Ian cautioned her. “For all we know, the helicopter is a preparation for another attack at a later time. Or part of an escape plan.”

Piper frowned. “I think the PHP has one grand gesture in it. They don’t strike me as the types to engage in a prolonged terrorist campaign. They’ll do one thing and then want to retreat to their compound and resume their regularly scheduled reclusive lives.”

“I concur with that,” Alex added. “They don’t have the resources to sustain an ongoing terror network.”

“Not unless El Noor plans to bankroll them for the foreseeable future,” Ian commented.

Alex replied, “If I were building an effective terror network, I would pick people more suited to the task. These PHP guys are amateurs. Honestly, as a group, they’re little more than subsistence farmers. There are a few men with educations of note among them—Joseph Brothers has an electrical engineering degree, for example. But most of them are pretty average.”

“Okay. So they’re one-shot wonders. If that’s the case, the helicopter must play into their one big plan.”

“Along with the Cessna in their shop,” Piper added.

“You could ram each of them into a structure 9/11-fashion,” Ian suggested.

She shook her head. “The damage two small aircraft could inflict on a big building would be minimal. If we’re talking about Las Vegas, the casinos are sprawling places with low concentrations of people at any one spot within their structures. Given all the elaborate planning and coordination that seems to have gone into this attack, aiming for such a small end result seems unlikely.”

“I agree,” Alex chimed in. “I’ll think about what I’d do with two small aircraft if I were El Noor. Meanwhile, you two be careful. Whoever’s behind this EL Noor persona is rich, smart, and dangerous.”

“Kinda like you, huh?” Ian quipped.

Alex hung up without deigning to respond to the jab.

She felt like they had all the pieces but hadn’t yet discovered the shape of the puzzle. If only they had some idea of the big picture, it felt as if all the little pieces would fall into place quickly.

Ian looked over at her and smiled wryly. “Hey, baby. Wanna go to Vegas?”

Piper stepped through the glass door Ian held for her and into the lobby of the regional CDC office in a Las Vegas hospital. She told a receptionist their names and that they had an appointment with the office's medical director.

She and Ian cooled their jets for about ten minutes before being shown back into a typical doctor's examining room.

"You did tell this guy we're working on a possible viral outbreak, right?" Ian muttered.

"Maybe he thought it was us infected," she muttered back.

The door opened and a bespectacled doctor in a white lab coat stepped into the room. "Hello. I'm Doctor Vargas. How can I help you?"

"You've gotten the alerts from the FBI to be on the lookout for unusual viral infections? Particularly of a hemorrhagic nature?" Piper asked.

"Yes, yes. We have a protocol for such things with the local emergency rooms and urgent care clinics. Everyone's on high alert."

Jeez. The guy sounded bored out of his mind.

"This is a credible and real threat, Doctor Vargas," she responded sharply.

"Do you have any idea how often a high visibility city like Las Vegas is the possible target of a terrorist attack? We go through this routine at least three times a year. And those are just the credible threats. We know how to respond, young lady."

"So there are currently no flu-like symptom outbreaks being reported locally?"

"No. I'd hear about them if there were." The man shook his head. "All this fuss about Ebola. Yes, we've had a few cases of it brought into the U.S. But we contained it successfully. While its symptoms can be spectacular, it's just not that contagious a disease. I do wish all you conspiracy theorists would get over your fixation on it."

Piper opened her mouth to tell the guy that a genetically engineered form of the virus damned well was worth fixating on, but Ian surreptitiously took her hand and squeezed it painfully tight. She got the message. Reluctantly, she snapped her jaw shut.

"Okay, Doctor. Thank you for your help," Ian said pleasantly. "For the record, the FBI is taking this particular threat seriously. We have direct intelligence that an attack may have already happened and be in an incubation phase."

The guy's eyebrows raised skeptically. Vargas didn't exactly laugh them out of his office, but he wasn't far from it. She and Ian paused on the sidewalk in front of the hospital to stare at each other.

"We're not crazy," she declared.

"We may be. We have no actual proof that Las Vegas is the target except a helicopter sixty miles away. It's pretty thin evidence."

She huffed and mopped her brow. It had to be 110 degrees in the shade. The bottoms of her feet were actually getting hot just standing on the concrete pavement. "Now what?"

"Now we wait for further developments. Either the FBI will make Abahdi talk, or Alex will come up with something, or people will start dying."

"And in the meantime?" she demanded.

He grinned at her. "We're in Vegas. Do you need to ask?"

"You want to gamble while this attack unfolds? Isn't that rather like Nero fiddling while Rome burned?"

"The big dogs are on this case. The investigation is out of our hands for the time being."

They checked into an off-strip hotel and spent the remainder of the afternoon sleeping in the loud hum of an air conditioner that couldn't quite keep up with the sweltering August heat outside. It was dark when Piper woke up to the sound of the shower running the bathroom.

Had things been better between her and Ian, she would have joined him. But as it was, she pulled on clothes and tuned the

television to a news channel to see if the world had come to an end yet or not. So far, no one was reporting any alarming viral outbreaks or bombs anywhere in the country.

Ian emerged from the bathroom looking better than any one man had a right to. He wore a black t-shirt that was just tight enough to outline his seriously hot physique. It stretched tight across his biceps and advertised that he was not a guy to mess with.

“Going out?” she asked in surprise.

“There’s a place in town I usually check out when I’m here.”

“Vegas regular, are you?”

“My unit trains in the area every year or two.”

Probably some sort of desert combat or survival training if she had to guess.

“You wanna come along?” he asked.

“And be your wingman?” she asked wryly.

He grinned reluctantly. “You’re not exactly prime wingman material. You’ll attract too much attention to yourself.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. She pulled her hair back into a simple ponytail and skipped all make-up, opting only to splash a little cold water on her face and brush her teeth before they headed out. She wore jeans and a plain, white t-shirt considerably looser than his.

The place he took her to—way, way off the Strip—was a dive. It had low-ceilings and cracked linoleum floors, and it was dark and smoky and stunk of sweat and stale beer. The men in the place were mostly the silent, dangerous type, and the women utterly predictable.

Piper groaned. “You did *not* bring me to a Special Forces groupie bar.”

“Nah. It’s not that exclusive a place.”

She looked around in disgust. “I know Special Forces guys when I see them, and these women are all but lying down on the pool table and spreading their legs.”

“It’s not that bad,” Ian replied, grinning.

“I hear panting. And that, right there,” she pointed at a wet spot on the floor, “is a puddle of drool.”

Ian bellied up to the beer and ordered a pair of beers on tap. He shoved a foamy glass at her and turned to survey the room. “Some decent action, tonight,” he commented over his brewsky.

Eyes narrowed, she scanned the room. She knew the female types. Bleached blondes. Busty. Tight jeans over juicy, wagging asses. High-heels to make them look that last ten pounds thinner. “There’s not an IQ in the lot that breaks triple digits,” she reported sourly.

“Guys don’t come here for the intellectual stimulation.” He was laughing outright at her, now.

She turned back to face the bar. “You’re an asshole,” she muttered.

“Jealous?” he inquired.

“Hardly.”

“Hey, look. Piper. Someone’s coming over to talk to you, in spite of your man clothes, general scrawniness, and obvious brainiac tendencies.”

She glanced up at a giant slab of a man. He was at the top end of the age range in the place, but she would bet he could take out half the male talent in this joint. His graying hair was buzzed short.

“This guy bothering you?” the slab rumbled, lifting his chin at Ian.

“Nah. He’s okay,” she mumbled.

“Sure you don’t want me to take his sorry ass out back and teach him some manners?”

Alarmed, she looked up at the man. “No, really. He’s fine.”

“I dunno…”

Ian reached over and slugged the guy’s shoulder. “Hey, T-Bone. Long time no see. How’s the other side of the fence?”

“Lucrative, man. You need to hop ship and come to the private security side of the house. Where’ve you been M&M?”

Piper looked back and forth between the two men. Of course. The Special Forces community was tiny. She would bet Ian knew half the yahoos in here. Scowling, she listened to the ritual trading of war stories between Ian and the mountain of a former Marine.

Once they’d traded evasive pleasantries about their most recent assignments, she was startled to hear T-Bone murmur, “Who’s the arm candy, Ian?”

“My partner. Piper, meet Cooper Bosworth.”

“Can I buy you a drink, darlin’?” Bosworth rumbled.

She smiled regretfully. “I’m designated wingman, tonight. And at the rate Ian’s going, he’s going to need some serious help finding a willing female and figuring out what to do with her. I’d better stay sober enough to help him find his dick—“

“Hey now!” Ian interrupted as T-Bone roared with laughter.

She shrugged, eyes glinting with irritation. “I dare you. Find a bimbo in here and have sex on the premises before we

leave.”

Ian stared at her in open shock. Something akin to disappointment passed through his gaze.

“You wanted a wingman, right?” she pressed. “Isn’t it my job to help you achieve cheap sex with the hottest groupie you can manage to snare with your line of bullshit?”

“Bit of an attitude your partner’s got on her,” T-Bone commented just before slugging about half a beer in a single pull.

Ian glared at her. “You noticed that, huh?” He picked up his glass as she glared back at him and moved off toward the dim recesses of the bar near a jukebox spewing country music and a tiny dance floor full of slutty bubbettes strutting their stuff. He was welcome to them.

“Bunch of half-drunk groupie chicks,” she muttered in disgust, staring down at the bar and the beer sitting between her braced elbows. “Hardly seems fair to turn Ian loose on them.”

T-Bone chuckled from beside her, his elbows planted next to hers. “Only kind of chicks he knows what to do with.”

She glanced over at the big man, startled. “Excuse me?”

“Ian ain’t exactly a ladies’ man. Oh, the girls swoon all over him, and the way I hear it he’s hell on wheels in the sack. But he’s a man’s man.”

“What the heck does that mean?” she demanded.

“He’s most comfortable with men. In the field. Blowing stuff up and hanging with a SEAL team. Women—they make him hinky.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“How’s it going between you two? Never thought I’d see him work with a broad.” T-Bone added hastily, “No offense.”

“None taken.” As for the whole, how’s it going between you question, she dodged it entirely.

“Where’d you two meet?” T-Bone inquired.

“Overseas. I spotted him through a scope on my sniper rig.”

The big man laughed heartily. “My greatest fear. A woman on the business end of a high-powered rifle.” He drained yet another beer and ordered a pitcher for himself this time around.

She peeked over her shoulder surreptitiously to check on Ian’s progress. A trashy blonde was hanging all over him and practically crawling into his pants on the dance floor. Ian didn’t look exactly head-over-heels with Slut-cheeks, but he didn’t look entirely miserable, either. That hadn’t taken long.

“You like him?” T-Bone asked.

Cripes. When did the slab of meat get so bloody observant? “He’s okay,” she replied, deliberately misunderstanding the question. “Decent to work with.”

“He’s the best in the business when it comes to a shootin’ match. An idiot about women, though, I’m tellin’ ya.”

The guy was hinting at something. She just had no idea what. “He got a past with a lady I should know about?”

“Nah. He’s been a confirmed bachelor all along.” Then T-Bone asked cryptically, “You wanna know fast whether or not he likes you back?”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?” She hadn’t admitted to liking Ian, let alone to wondering about his feelings for her.

The big man ignored her pretense of not knowing precisely what he was talking about, and instead, reached over and planted his hand on her rear end.

“Hey!” She bumped his arm away with her elbow.

In a millisecond or so, the huge man had wrapped her in a bear hug she couldn’t breathe in, let alone move in, and planted a sloppy, beer-flavored kiss on her mouth. She pounded at his sides with her fists, but with her elbows trapped under his arms, she ended up flapping at him more like a chicken than striking like a real field operator.

The more she tried to fight, the tighter he gripped her. He was going to start breaking bones if he didn’t loosen up pretty soon. Or maybe she would just pass out from lack of oxygen.

T-Bone laughed. “Aww, c’mon, honey. I’m more of a man than that Navy jack—“

Without warning, the big man let go of her and spun away as if he’d been grabbed by a tornado and torn away from her by the force of the wind. She bent over gasping for breath. The guy had been squeezing her like a danged python. A solid thwap of knuckles on flesh made her look up, startled.

A low, enraged voice drew her the rest of the way upright. “Get your hams off the lady, Bosworth. I’d hate to have to kill you in a nice place like this.”

The Marine grinned over at her beneath the stream of blood pouring from his broken nose. He reached up casually to straighten it with a sickening sound of crunching bone. “There’s your answer, ma’am.”

“What the fuck are you trying to pull, T-Bone?” Ian looked back and forth between her and the big marine.

She stared back at T-Bone in shock. Slowly, she turned to stare at Ian.

“What?” he demanded, irritated. “What the hell’s going on?”

Busty blonde chick from the dance floor chose that moment to mince up on her six-inch heels and wrap herself bodily

around Ian's left leg and arm. "Hey, handsome. You're with me. Let the big guy have that skinny bitch. She looks frigid, anyway."

Piper whirled to face the drunk bubbette and pitched her voice low, packing it with as much warning as she could muster. "The skinny bitch can kick your ass into last week and is inviting you to stay out of this. And while you're at it, you can peel your slutty self off my partner."

The blonde took an aggressive step forward, inch-long fake fingernails outstretched.

T-Bone, wads of paper napkin stuffed in his nose, stepped in front of her with surprising speed. "The skinny bitch isn't kidding, sweetheart. She's an operator like the boys. She'll kill you and mop the floor with you for good measure. Leave her be."

The blonde threw a few phrases of invective over T-Bone's shoulder as he ushered her out to the dance floor, but in about ten seconds, the ex-Marine had her totally distracted and starting to smile up at him.

Piper let out a slow breath. Holy crap. She really had been prepared to hurt that blonde if she didn't get away from Ian. "Let's get out of here," she mumbled at him.

"But I haven't had sex, yet."

She threw him a dirty look. "Take me back to the hotel and you can have all the sex you'd like, there."

"Hoo, baby!" he exclaimed. He swept her up in his arms and planted a sound kiss on her lips. Like T-Bone's, it was beer-flavored. But unlike T-Bone's, it made her knees go weak and her insides turn to jelly.

"How 'bout you and me take a stroll down the hall, Pipes? The bathrooms lock. We can get as frisky as we want and no one would bother us."

"Up till the part where T-Bone decides he wants to take the door off its hinges," she retorted. "I'm serious. I want to get out of here."

He shrugged over at his old comrade and threw a couple of bills down on the counter in front of the bartender. "Drinks for the big guy are on me." The bartender scooped up the bills and nodded, grinning.

She pulled free of Ian's tugging hand so she could move to the edge of the dance floor and lay a hand on the big man's forearm. The blonde threw her a bitchy look, which she ignored as she leaned close enough to murmur, "You're a prince among men, Mr. Bosworth. I owe you one."

He mock saluted her with a touch of his fingertips to his eyebrow. "Any time, ma'am. Take care of our boy, y'hear?"

"Will do, T-Bone. I've got his back."

Ian, who had moved up beside her, chuckled, "And I've got yours, baby." He passed his palm lightly over the back of her jeans and thrust his fingers in the far pocket. The gesture was casual and familiar and melted her into giant puddle of mushy feelings. She let Ian turn her and guide her out the front door onto the street.

"Can you walk or should I get us a cab?" she asked him. She couldn't tell how drunk he was, or whether a walk would help clear his head or just make him sick.

He glanced over at her and grinned. "I'm fine. Are you too tired to walk back to the hotel?"

His diction was abruptly perfect and his movements coordinated and controlled. She frowned at him as they started walking down the block. "You're not drunk at all, are you?"

"It takes a whole lot more than a couple of beers to knock me off my horse, darlin'."

"What was all of that back there, then?" she demanded.

"All of what?" he asked innocently.

"The blonde bimbo hanging all over you. Slugging T-Bone."

"You seemed to want the full wingman experience. I was giving it to you."

She punched him in the upper arm, and she put some muscle behind it. "You are such a jerk!"

"You're the one who bet me I couldn't get laid in there. I hate to disappoint you, but you were going to lose that bet. Times at least three."

She would've liked to punch him again, but she had to admit that he was undoubtedly right. It had been stupid to dare him to pick up a woman like that. She'd been stupid. And she'd reacted out of all proportion to that bimbo clinging to Ian like she owned him.

"Are we okay?" he asked.

She was pretty sure she was not okay. She had never before in her life been hit by jealousy like that. And she really, really didn't like what it said about her feelings for Ian McCloud. She was *not* falling for him. She was not that stupid. She wasn't.

So. Piper didn't like another woman hanging all over him did she? Well, well, well. Would wonders never cease? He glanced at her as he silently opened their hotel door and held it open for her. She slipped past him with a distracted nod of thanks. Looked a little lost in thought, there.

He moved over to the minibar in the corner, pulled out a glass, and emptied two mini-bottles of vodka into it. He carried the drink over to her where she stood staring out the window at the distant Strip.

"Don't overthink it," he said quietly as he thrust the vodka into her hand.

"Overthink what?"

"Us."

"What is there to overthink?"

"I dunno. I'm not overthinking it," he replied, with a hint of humor in his voice.

She smiled reluctantly at him. And then to his vague surprise, she downed the double shot of vodka in a single toss of the wrist. She coughed, and he pounded her back until she caught her breath. He steadied her as she righted herself, his hands resting on her shoulders.

Don't be stupid, McCloud. Not only was this woman his partner, but he didn't even know if he could trust her or not.

Although it wasn't like he'd trusted her the first time he'd fallen into the sack with her, either. Apparently, he liked an edge of danger in his serious relationships with women. Which made him officially an idiot. Or drunk. Or both.

"Thanks for coming to my defense against the peroxide super villain back in the bar," he murmured.

"And thank you for taking on Mount Marine in my behalf. He'd have killed you if it had come down to a fight."

"T-Bone? Nah. I've taken him before."

She blinked up at him, surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah. And last time I wasn't motivated to defend my woman from the bastard."

"Your—" she breathed, breaking off abruptly, as if the notion shocked the hell out of her.

God knew, it shocked him. Was that how he thought of her? His woman? In spite of everything she'd failed to share with him before? Sonofabitch.

"Whew. That vodka's going straight to my head," she muttered, swaying just a little.

"Didn't your daddy ever tell you not to mix beer and hard liquor? It'll knock you on your ass."

She giggled a little. "My daddy thinks anything stronger than milk is the devil's drink. Whiskey's only for cleaning wounds in his world."

"Boring bastard. How'd he ever manage to land a woman and have two kids?"

"My mom was hot. I look like her—but not as sexy as she was. That's why my father hates me. I remind him of her."

She might not be officially drunk, but apparently the vodka was making her a little more brutally honest than usual. Or maybe it was her promise to be honest to him kicking in.

Letting down his guard around her was a mistake. His rational self knew it as surely as he was standing here. She could still be lying to him. Could still be trying to distract him from thinking about her family and what they were preparing to do.

But he was contemplating stripping her down and crawling into the sack with her as surely as he was standing here. *Dumb idea, McCloud.*

Damn. Maybe he'd had more to drink than he realized. Or maybe the stress of the past few months had finally caught up with him. Either way, he felt an irresistible urge to cut loose and make love with her.

Sleep. They both needed to sleep off the booze they'd imbibed. His head would be clearer in the morning.

"Bedtime for Piper." He lifted her plain white t-shirt over her head. "If it came to a choice between me and your father in a

firefight, which one of us would you save?"

"Duh. You." Her voice was muffled by the cotton and he gave a quick yank. Her face, partially covered by mussed hair, popped into sight.

"Seriously? You'd choose me over your family?"

"Love is thicker than blood." She punctuated the statement by poking him in the chest with her index finger.

"Love, huh? You drunk, Roth?"

"Not nearly drunk enough. Where'd you get those little bottles of vodka from?"

"I have a better idea." He swept his arm around her waist and pulled her up against his chest. "Let's get drunk on each other."

What the hell was he doing? This was madness. The last thing he needed to do was further complicate an already complicated relationship by sleeping with her again. Crap. How drunk *was* he?

She laughed and looped her arms around his neck. "I'm always a little drunk on you. As soon as you touch me, boom. There goes my brain."

He totally knew the sensation. She did the exact same thing to his brain. He grinned down at her. "Good to know. Any other classified information about yourself you'd like to divulge to me, seeing as how I won't remember it in the morning?"

"I like it when you go all alpha male in bed."

"Yeah? What else?"

"I like it when you hold me afterward. It makes me feel like you care about *me* and not just the sex."

Was that true? Did he have feelings for her beyond the gratification of the moment? God knew he'd put his neck on the line for her more times than he cared to think about. "Continue."

"I'm scared," she whispered.

That made him draw up sharply and stare down at her in the neon glow of the city outside. The original badass chick was scared of anything? "Scared of what?"

"That I'll die—that we'll die—without ever finding out if what we have between us could be more."

"More than what?" His throat was inexplicably tight when he spoke the words.

"You know. More than fantastic sex."

Fantastic? That was how she rated their sex, huh? He wouldn't disagree with the assessment. "Why might we die?"

"What if we get exposed to the virus? We're in Las Vegas. What if this is where the virus was released? We could both already be infected."

He stared down at her, appalled. "Wouldn't there be only a limited number of people who were right next to the virus when it was turned loose? They'll get sick first and start spreading it to other people, right?"

"God, no. Any viral weapon worth its salt will go contagious before its carriers become symptomatic. Surfaces and food sources and the air all over town could be saturated with the virus by now. It's been, what? Three or four days since Yusef could have been here in Vegas? At least half the town could be dead men walking."

He looked over at the air conditioning vents in panic. "We have to get out of the city!"

"Too late. That blonde kissed you, right? If she's exposed, you're toast."

"You kissed T-Bone," he declared, appalled.

"Did not. He kissed me. And I kissed you, too. Yup, we're all toast."

"How can you be so relaxed about this?" he exclaimed.

She draped her arms over his shoulders and ran her fingers through the short hair at the back of his neck. "I figured the only way to stop this virus would be to get close to it. I pretty much expected to die once I realized what we're up against. Didn't you?"

Hell, no, he didn't! He had stuff to do with his life. A wife. Kids. Hell, grandkids. Dammit, he wasn't ready to die! "You seriously think you're going to die on this op?" he asked her in disbelief.

"Well, yeah." Her words were starting to blur. That vodka she'd slugged was catching up with the beer. "I'm throwing myself on my sword to redeem the family honor. Someone's gotta make up for what my dad and brother are doing."

Was *that* what she was doing? Sacrificing herself to even the karmic scales of her family's crimes? His cell phone rang and he disengaged from her. *Saved by the bell.*

"Yeah?" he said irritably into the device.

"Agent Starkohl, here. FBI Los Angeles bureau chief."

Ian went on full battle alert. "What have you got? Did Abahdi break and talk?"

"No. But his daughter did."

Ian shoved his free hand through his hair in distress. Jesus. The FBI was breaking eight-year-olds, now? He understood the necessity, but it didn't sit well with him. She was just a kid. It wasn't her fault her mother had died and her father had lost it.

The FBI agent was talking again. "She says they flew into Mexico and drove into the States in the back of a big truck. Her daddy took her to Las Vegas to celebrate her birthday at, and I quote, the most wonderful circus ever. With clowns and

elephants and pretty ladies. End quote.”

One of the big hotels on the Strip was circus themed. Ian swore under his breath. “The virus? Where did he dump the coolers?”

“She said he left with the big white boxes right before they left the shiny city. When he came back to the hotel room, apparently, he didn’t have the boxes any more. Las Vegas is the target. I repeat. Las Vegas is the target. And the virus has been released.”

Ian sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. Piper, who’d lain down while he was on the call, curled around him, mink-like. She was warm and sleek, and he wasn’t going to get a chance to find out if she was being honest with him. If he could forgive her and trust her again. They were sitting at ground zero. If they weren’t dead yet, they could be, soon.

The FBI agent spoke heavily. “We need you to find out when, where, and how the virus was released and give the CDC any support it needs to manage the outbreak.”

“Do you guys have any idea how bad this is going to get?” Ian demanded. “There are thousands of tourists in this town, and they’re all potentially exposed.”

“Make that hundreds of thousands, McCloud. We estimate that 220,000 people have passed through the city in the past three days. Effective now, the city is quarantined. You’re the only special operators we have on the ground, there. You’ll spearhead our efforts inside the quarantine zone.”

“And die?”

“We’ll do everything in our power to come up with an antidote, and the two of you will be at the top of the list to receive it.”

“Whatever,” Ian retorted. He knew full well the odds of scientists coming up with a cure for this killer virus in the next few days. “What do the powers-that-be want us to do?”

“Help with crowd control.”

“We may have a bigger problem,” Ian announced. “My partner and I believe the virus is only the first part of a two-pronged attack on the city. With your permission, I’d like to pursue investigating the other angle we’ve uncovered.”

“That’s a negative. You’re more useful there, dealing with the known crisis. Widespread panic is likely. We need you to help keep people calm and show that the government is in control of the situation—“

Ian hung up on the FBI agent before he could say something he truly regretted. The government was fucking not in control of anything. Hell, if he and Piper were going to die anyways, it wasn’t like they needed to worry about disobeying orders. The PHP had yet to drop the other shoe in this drama, and he’d be damned if he’d sit around twiddling his thumbs while those bastards knocked out all the power to a city already in crisis.

A vision of dead girls with blood red eyes stared back at him out of the darkest corner of the hotel room.

“C’mon, Piper. We’ve got to go.”

“But I’m tired.”

“Right now, baby. Las Vegas is about to get quarantined, and we’ve got to slip out before all the roads are closed.”

Piper watched tensely for pursuit as Ian guided their rental car onto Hwy 15, headed north and east out of North Las Vegas. Funny how the booze retreated from her mind when faced with the prospect of being trapped in a city full of contagion. She wasn't entirely sober, but she was working damned hard at ignoring the alcohol in her blood.

"This is a major highway," she protested. "It'll be one of the first roads closed. And Nellis Air Force Base is up this way. They've got plenty of cops who can be recruited to close the roads."

Ian shrugged. "Overton is this direction. That's where the PHP helicopter was last seen. Thought we'd head up there and see what we can learn about it. We've got no other leads to follow right now."

It was a reasonable plan. She just didn't think they were going to make it clear of the city before the quarantine was put in place. She used her spotter's scope, which was basically a small telescope, to scan the highway ahead. Sure enough, a cluster of brake lights and the faint blue and red flash of police cars came into view. Crud. She and Ian were too late to slip out of the net.

Frantically, she scanned the sides of the road with her scope. "Take this exit," she blurted.

Ian swerved the vehicle off the highway at the last minute as the exit ramp loomed beside them. "You got an idea?" he asked grimly.

She glanced over at him. "Any chance you know how to hot wire a dune buggy?"

He frowned. "I can hot wire a car. I expect the ignition on a dune buggy is the same. Why?"

She pointed at an ATV and dune buggy rental business ahead on the right. "There aren't all that many roads out of Las Vegas. If we want to get up to Overton, I'm thinking we'll need to go cross-country to make it."

Ian grinned. "I like the way you think." He turned off the headlights and parked in front of the closed dune buggy business. "We'll need all the fuel we can carry. And we'll need to bust open that lock on the gate."

"I'll get the lock," she offered.

"You're not going to shoot it out and make an unholy ruckus like you did in Khartoum, are you?" he asked quickly.

She scowled at him. "I got that door open before we died, thank you very much. And I'll pick this lock if it makes you feel better."

He hopped over the low, steel gate and headed for one of the largest dune buggy models, a four-seater with a sturdy undercarriage and big wheels. It took her a while to pick the double-action padlock holding the lot's exit gate closed. By the time the chain fell away from the steel posts, Ian had started the dune buggy and loaded up the back seat with several big jugs of extra gas he'd collected from other dune buggies. She threw the gate open, waited until he drove through, locked it shut again, and climbed in the passenger seat.

"Okay, let's blow this popsicle stand and bypass the roadblock and quarantine," he declared.

She replied, "Are we going to get in trouble for leaving Vegas like this?"

"Do you care? We're probably exposed to the virus, right? Which means we're dying if I don't misunderstand you," he answered grimly.

There was that.

She braced herself on the overhead sissy bar as they bumped across the rocky desert. It was surprisingly slow going, even though they were in a motorized vehicle capable of handling the terrain. Dawn had lightened the sky overhead and tinged the eastern horizon with peaches and pink hues before Ian turned the dune buggy back toward the north and west.

"Where are you going?" Piper asked in quick alarm.

"The PHP helicopter was last in Overton, which is about 60 miles northeast of Las Vegas. We can bump across the desert all damn day, or I can hit the highway north of the quarantine road blocks, and we can be there in an hour."

It took them more like two hours by the time they rejoined Highway 15 and melded into the heavy northbound flow of traffic. They weren't the only people from the area around Las Vegas eager to put some distance between themselves and the quarantine zone, apparently.

The buggy's radio was saying nothing whatsoever about any kind of quarantine. News blackout, most likely. But it was hard to cut off the Internet and phone networks entirely. As the country woke up, word would get out.

Speaking of which, Piper pulled out her cell phone to check its reception. No signal. "Ian, is your phone working?"

He fished it out and took a look. "Nope. I've got no coverage out here. We must have mountains between us and the nearest tower."

"Or else the government has shut down all communications in and out of Las Vegas," she retorted.

"Trying to control panic?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It's a pretty normal part of crisis response scenarios at the CDC. It delays attempts to rush police lines. Gives the authorities time to get other assets in place to back up the police and keep the populace in the quarantine zone.

"There's the turnoff for the airport up ahead," he commented.

"Do you want to go in now, guns blazing and confront the PHP guys, or are we going to play it low key and wait till tonight to check out the helicopter?"

Ian glanced over at her. "What are the odds your dad and his cronies have made friends with the managers at the airport? If we go in and ask some questions, will the staff at the airport tip of your old man?"

"Absolutely. My father is charming when he puts his mind to it. The way I hear it, aviators stick together. It's a tight little club. Kind of like the good ole' boy network in military intelligence."

"What good ole' boy network?" he asked in surprise.

She waved off the question. She did not need to get in to a debate about women in the intel world and workplace inequality. Las Vegas was dying behind them. And besides, the boys had already kicked her out of their club. "Why do you ask about my father?"

"If he's likely to have made friends, then we'll need to wait." Ian drove around for a little while and eventually spotted a crappy motel that looked like it had seen better decades long before the sun baked it to a parched near ruin.

"Betchya they rent these rooms by the hour," she muttered as they hopped out of the dune buggy.

"Not taking that bet," Ian retorted. "Let me do the talking. You talk too classy for a place like this."

Frowning, she listened on as he put on the absolutely worst bubba imitation she'd ever been unfortunate enough to witness. But the clerk forked over a room key dangling from a big plastic teardrop after Ian forked over a wad of cash. She couldn't resist messing with him just a little, though.

"Hey, save some of that cash for me," she exclaimed.

The clerk's bored expression didn't waver for an instant, but Ian's ears reddened. Grinning at his back, she followed him outside. It was barely nine a.m. but the day was already heating up fast to oven-like conditions.

The tired-looking motel room was clean after a fashion. At least it was better than crawling around in the African bush. She forced herself to stretch out on the bed. Her head ached a little and she experienced a brief bout of dizziness as she laid down. Good thing she hadn't drunk any more of that vodka last night before the FBI call came in.

"Need some hair of the dog?" Ian asked.

"Nope. Just water."

He carried her a glass full of vaguely brown water from the tap. It smelled like rust and tasted like nails. But it was wet and soothed her headache.

Ian stretched out beside her on the narrow double bed, their shoulders and elbows rubbing. He asked absently, "What does the onset of Ebola look like?"

"Flu-like symptoms. Fever. Body aches. Maybe some vomiting and diarrhea. The heavy bleeding doesn't happen until the end, and it doesn't happen in every case. But then, we're not dealing with plain-jane Ebola. No telling what other effects Yusef's strain will have.

"The girls in the body bags had red eyeballs."

"That's from capillary hemorrhaging. All the small capillaries in their bodies ruptured. They probably had full body bruising, too. Bloody stool, bloating, and skin lesions wouldn't be surprising once the real hemorrhaging kicks in."

"So we're going to die horrible, painful deaths?" he murmured.

"I try not to think about it," she murmured back. "And we don't know for sure that we were exposed. Maybe we dodged the bullet."

"Is anybody sick in Las Vegas, yet?" he asked.

"No idea. I bet that CDC guy is thinking about us, right about now. Bet he's not calling us crazy anymore."

Ian snorted. "He's still in denial. He'll have to be knee-deep in dead bodies before he believes there's a crisis."

"He may get to experience that," she mumbled as she drifted off to sleep.

Ian stared at the ceiling as Piper napped beside him. This was seriously not how he'd planned to leave this world. He felt so damned helpless just sitting around waiting for an invisible little virus to lay him low. Restless, he got out of bed and rooted around in the go bags he and Piper had been hauling around with them since D.C.

The survival equipment inside was adequate for a trained soldier to live off the land for many weeks if necessary. He and Piper should just take the gear and go. Run for the hills and get away from any other human beings. Just the two of them. No exposure to killer fevers, no outsiders judging them. No jobs. No missions.

That would be nice.

Except she wouldn't do it any more than he would, at the end of the day. They were both soldiers in their hearts of hearts. They lived to serve a higher purpose.

She'd been calmer about losing her job than he'd expected. And she was still out here risking her neck in spite of having been canned. That said a lot about her core character.

She was more like him than she cared to admit. Or maybe than *he'd* cared to admit up till now. Lord knew, she'd flown to his defense last night when that blonde was crawling all over him. It had been pretty cute, actually.

Unable to sleep, he left the motel and found a convenience store. He loaded up on water and non-perishable food, surprised word wasn't out yet in this area and that there hadn't already been a run on this little store. Grateful for small blessings, he took his purchases and headed back to the motel.

Piper was pacing the room restlessly when he unlocked the door. "Thank God!" she cried out. "They've cut off all the phones, and the television is out."

"Is the TV itself not working, or is the cable service down?" he asked with interest.

"Whole cable company is shut down according to the desk clerk. And the phone land lines are out, too."

"Uncle Sam's not going to be able to sit on this for too much longer," Ian commented.

"Which makes me think the PHP will have to make its move soon. As infrastructure is taken off line, doing whatever they're going to do will get harder," she replied.

"Stop pacing. You'll wear a hole in the linoleum," he muttered. She spun to face him, wringing her hands. Noting the unconscious gesture, he asked, "What's wrong, Piper?"

"What if this was my family's plan all along?" she wailed. "To get all these modern services turned off while Las Vegas is quarantined?"

He answered slowly, "I think you father will reach for something larger than merely getting the TV and phones shut down for a while." He grabbed her hands and forcibly stilled them. "Breathe, baby. Calm down. I need you thinking on all cylinders. In your estimation, would a telephone and television service interruption be enough for your father to feel like he'd made his point?"

She exhaled hard a few times. Then looked up at him in distress. One more hard breath out, and then, "No. It's not enough. He'll do more."

Ian spoke soothingly. "It's heading toward noon now. Why don't we go over to the airport and get the lay of the land before it gets too hot?"

"Action. That would be good. I need to do something. *We* need to do something."

She had as bad a case of pre-mission jitters as he'd ever seen. "Easy, darlin'," he murmured. "All in good time. The world's not going to end in the next few minutes."

Although, truth be told, it might. He had no idea what was going on in the city behind them, and he didn't want to think about it. More than most people, he knew how fast the veneer of civilization fell away when people thought they and their loved ones were going to die.

He and Piper climbed into the dune buggy and headed out. He used a combination of side roads and cross-country jaunts to navigate to the municipal airport. On foot, they climbed a ridge overlooking one side of the facility. They laid side-by-side in the grit and gravel, scoping out the airfield as the sun climbed overhead, beating down on them mercilessly. The worst of the day's heat rolled in fast. It had to be pushing 120 degrees out here.

"What is it with you and hot places?" she griped under her breath.

"Hot chicks. Hot weather. Guess I just like it hot."

She rolled her eyes and plastered her ruddy, perspiring face to her sniper's scope.

"See any white choppers with red stripes?" he muttered to her, staring through his own scope.

"They could have repainted it," she replied.

"Nah. Aviation paint is tricky stuff. Expensive. You have to strip off the old layer first, for weight purposes. Plus, it can't peel at high speed and has to be anti-corrosive."

"Over there," she announced.

He glanced away from his scope to look at her finger. He followed its trajectory outward to an asphalt parking area wavering behind massive heat distortion in the air. Sure enough, he spotted a white and red chopper. Using his scope, he took a closer look at it. "What's that thing on the side of it?"

“I don’t know. It looks like metal steps up into the passenger compartment.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Disabled access to a helicopter?” she mumbled. “That is strange.”

“It’s not getting any cooler out here. What say we hike on over there and take a closer look? The airport looks deserted at the moment.”

“I don’t relish sitting here baking all afternoon,” she said by way of reply.

They cut through the hurricane fence with a pair of big wire cutters Ian extracted from one of the go bags. He rolled under the fence first and held it up for Piper to follow him.

They hiked casually across a big field toward the airplanes as if they belonged there. Sometimes, it was best to hide in plain sight. With no cover whatsoever on the field, there was no way they would be able to approach the helicopter stealthily. Today, they just had to brazen it out.

They arrived at the row of small airplanes tied down to steel anchors sunk in the concrete. Dodging under wings and stepping over tie-down ropes, they approached the PHP helicopter.

The first thing Ian noticed was that it seemed fairly hefty for a civilian bird. It turned out the strange metal steps were welded onto the left skid of the helo.

Up close, he saw that two more steps would fold down from the step assembly in flight, extending several feet below the skid. On the ground, of course, the steps couldn’t extend because they would run into the dirt.

“What do you make of this?” he asked Piper, partially unfolding the aluminum extension steps and then replacing them. They’d clearly been welded onto the bird recently.

“Never seen anything like it. Those could only be used in flight. But if you’re going to hover a few feet above the ground, why not just jump down...or go ahead and land the helicopter?”

He tested the back door latch above the weird steps. “Huh. Unlocked.”

“Rats. I was hoping to shoot out the lock,” she remarked dryly.

“Hah hah.” He ducked into the rear passenger seats and sat down in the far one to have a look around.

Piper plunked down in the seat beside him. “Any sign of a bomb?”

“Not at a glance. I’m going to have to check the exterior storage areas, but I don’t see anything like I found on your dad’s fixed wing plane.”

They spent the next half hour searching every nook and cranny of the helicopter to no avail. It was nothing but a one each helicopter replete with all the appropriate helicopter guts. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for those folding steps.

“Convinced it’s just a helicopter?” she asked as she hopped over the welded steps assembly to the ground.

“Yeah. I’m stumped—“

“You’re also busted,” a pissed off male voice he recognized all too well announced out of the shadows.

“Jesus Christ. Not again,” Ian groaned. How in the hell did these PHP guys keep sneaking up on him like this?

“You didn’t seriously think we wouldn’t have this field under video surveillance did you?” Piper’s father asked as he gestured one of his men to frisk Ian.

Ian threw up his hands in apparent disgust. “Okay, this one’s on Piper. I told her it was a bad idea to see if we could get into this helicopter and leave a note for you, but she thought it would make up for the way we split from your place in Idaho.”

Piper looked at him as if she couldn’t believe he was throwing her under the bus. Too bad he couldn’t explain to her that in his experience, humor was often the most effective way to diffuse otherwise tense or even deadly situations. *C’mon, baby. Get with the program, here. Keep it light.*

It was a deadly dangerous moment with his life and hers balancing on a razor’s edge. Only his many years in the field made him able to pretend to a calm he was far from feeling. Piper didn’t have anywhere near the same experience to draw on. And worse, she knew these guys and the violence they were capable of. The deck was doubly stacked against her. Mentally, he begged her to hang in there, follow his lead, and keep her wits about her.

She stared intently at him for a millisecond more as if trying to read his mind. And then she declared tartly, “Yeah, well, you couldn’t sneak up on a corpse without it hearing you and waking from the dead. How in the hell you manage to hunt for deer is beyond me.”

“I didn’t say I ever kill any deer. I just said I like to hunt ‘em,” he retorted in an aggrieved tone.

She rolled her eyes. “*Now* you tell me.”

A youngish guy Ian thought was her brother commented, “When are you gonna quit trying to be just like the boys, Piper? You’re a girl. Get over it.”

Sure enough, she scowled and shot an annoyed sibling glare at the guy.

Ian chimed in. “I keep trying to tell her to let me do the manly stuff. But she insists on trying to keep up with me. I’m the one who wears the pants, baby doll.”

She huffed and threw him a dirty look.

Ian glanced around at the half-dozen assault weapons pointed at him. “Guess I’m not getting any tonight, huh?”

Commiserating smirks erupted all around. There it was. The break in tension. The relaxation of shoulders. The imminent threat of them getting shot was past. For the moment.

Piper whined in a tone he'd never heard from her before, "I'm hot. And thirsty. Can we *please* go inside where there's some air conditioning and cold water?"

Joseph Brothers shook his head in disappointment. "And this is why you'll never be one of us, Piper. You're too attached to creature comforts. You're not self-reliant enough."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't live in the Nevada desert if there weren't air conditioning, either. I'm not *stupid*."

Ahh, nicely done. She'd pitched her voice in just the right tone to make it clear that she was, in fact, dumber than a post.

On cue, Brothers rolled his eyes and muttered in Ian's direction, "You're welcome to her."

Ian reached over and looped an arm over her shoulders. "She may be high maintenance, but she's worth it." He paused a heartbeat and added, "So far."

A few chuckles were audible as Brothers ordered, "Take them into the FBO. Get her some water and tie them up."

Ian had received enough supply shipments at obscure civilian airports to know that FBO stood for Fixed Base Operator, a small aviation company operating out of a local airport. It would provide a variety of services to pilots—weather reports, maps, fuel, and even simple maintenance service.

He and Piper were herded to the one-story building with a cluster of trucks parked in front of it by the PHP gang. They were, indeed, given bottles of water before he and Piper were parked on metal chairs and tied up. Their ankles were tied to the chair legs, and their hands tied behind their backs.

"We still on track for this afternoon?" one of the men asked Brothers.

"Yeah," Piper's father answered, "See to it the plane is topped off for gas. We want the explosion to be as spectacular as possible."

Had the PHP already transported their small plane and its bomb all the way down here? Wow. Those guys weren't wasting any time putting their plan in motion. Interesting that his and Piper's repeat appearance hadn't disrupted the schedule. They must be on a timetable dictated by someone else. The shadowy El Noor, maybe?

If a suspicious person turned up twice around the edges of one of his ops the way he and Piper had this one, that would be cause for him to scrap the op entirely. Or at least to delay the op until the suspicious person was eliminated as a threat. He would never send his men out on a compromised mission. But it didn't seem to be giving Piper's father the slightest pause.

"We gonna leave a guard on these two?" one of the men asked Brothers.

"Nah. We'll bring 'em along and dump them," Piper's father replied casually.

Piper glanced over at him in alarm.

She was right. That didn't sound good. Ian surreptitiously tested the ropes binding him. The Boy Scout who'd tied him up had done a great job of it. He wasn't going anywhere until someone untied or cut the ropes.

Brothers left the building with several of his men, and Ian took the opportunity to ask one of the other men, "Is tying us up really necessary? She's the guy's daughter for God's sake. He's my father-in-law. It's not like we mean you guys any harm."

The random foot soldier he'd chosen just shrugged back at Ian. But it was clear the other two guys with guns were listening.

Ian continued, "Piper has this bug up her ass to prove that she can do stuff as well as you guys. Obviously, she can't, but I figured I would never hear the end of it unless I let her try and get the idea out of her system once and for all. Gawd. You know how a woman can fixate one thing and refuse to let it go. Dog with a bone, I'm telling ya."

More commiserating looks from all the guys this time. He glanced over at her sitting beside him. "I love you Piper, but once you sink your teeth into something, you just will not let go."

She stared at him in shock. Blinked once slowly. Stared some more. What was wrong with her—

--*Oh. The I-love-you bit.* Huh. That had slipped out without him really thinking it through. It had just come out of his mouth. Did he actually love her a little and not even realize it until now?

Nah. Not possible. He didn't do emotions like love.

Right?

Huh.

It was a damned good thing she was tied in her chair, or Piper would have fallen out of it on the spot. *I love you, Piper?*

She never, in a million years, expected to hear those words tumble out of Ian McCloud's mouth. And he said them so naturally, too. Like they were second nature to him.

A craving to hear them again washed over her. Maybe when he had his arms around her. Or over a romantic, candlelit dinner for two. Or...heck, any time when she knew he actually meant it.

"Yeah, well, I love you too, you big galoot," she threw back at him.

It was all part of their newlywed act, right? But crap, those words felt good coming out of her mouth. Like confessing a guilty secret she'd been carrying around for a long time and finally unburdened herself of.

Hah. His gaze shot to hers for an unguarded instant. And then the mask fell over his expressive eyes and he grinned lopsidedly at her. "Glad to hear it, darlin'. Once your dad's done punishing us for trying to sneak up on him, I'm gonna show you just how glad I am."

She gulped. Dang, that man could give as good as he got.

"Speaking of which, how long does your father usually hold a grudge? Before long, I'm gonna have to return some of that water he gave us to nature. If you catch my drift."

She allowed a brief glint of humor to enter her expression. Ian acting as dim as a bulb without a filament was quite an experience. "I catch your drift," she retorted dryly. "I dunno. Dad can stay mad a good long time. But usually reason prevails in a few hours. Can your bladder hang on that long, hon?"

He winced theatrically. "I'll try."

Was he angling to get their captors to untie him? To mount an escape attempt? With all these armed guys standing around in broad daylight, that seemed like a foolish plan. But at this point, she didn't question his judgment. He'd proven over and over that he knew his stuff in special ops.

"Don't worry, buddy," one of the gunmen commented. "We'll be out of here pretty soon."

Piper's gaze met Ian's momentarily. Soon, huh? What was up with that? She craned to look out the window toward the airfield. It looked like the helicopter was being pre-flighted. But not by her father. The dark-bearded guy—the chopper pilot with the Section 8 whose name she didn't remember at the moment—was doing the inspection on the helicopter. Where was her father?

She looked over at one of the guys she'd known since she was a child. "Hey, Granville. Any chance my dad has a minute to come in here and talk with me?"

"Naw, punkin. He's busy right now."

"Doing what?"

"Getting ready for the big show. I'm sure he'll come in to say good-bye to you before he takes off, though."

"Takes off as in flies away or takes off as in gets in his truck and leaves the airport?" she asked curiously

Too much. The guy shrugged apologetically and didn't answer. She smiled politely and settled back to wait for the PHP's big show to unfold. They didn't have long to wait. In about five minutes, the radio behind the FBO's counter crackled to life.

"I'm ready over here," a voice she didn't know announced.

"Ready here," her father answered. "I'll sit tight until you radio that your mission is complete, and then I'm off."

"Roger that."

Granville, the talkative guard, moved over to the radio and picked up the microphone. "Whaddiya want me and Otto to do? We're supposed to go with the chopper, but we've got Piper and her husband in here..."

Piper held her breath as a lengthy pause ensued. Then her father answered, "Take them with you. Dump them in the desert

far enough from anywhere that they can't stop the attack."

Attack? Some small part of her wailed in disbelief. The part that still wanted her father to be a hero. To be a man she could look up to.

"You wanna come see her before you go, Joseph?" Granville paused. "You know. To say good-bye."

Another long pause ensued. Then, "We've said all we need to say to each other. Y'all go on. Get going. We're on a schedule, here."

She ought to be relieved. But instead, she was just...hurt. No matter what a bastard he'd been and no matter how crazy he'd been over the years, he was still her father. The only parent she'd ever known. Something really bad was about to happen—something potentially life threatening—and he didn't want to walk a few steps to hug her one last time. To say goodbye. Maybe tell her for once that he loved her.

Damned if her eyes weren't burning like fire and swimming like water. Something brushed against her left calf and she looked down. Ian had craned in his bindings and managed to twist his leg to the side enough to barely rub his pant leg against hers.

She glanced up at him, and he mouthed, "Be tough."

He was right. They were in a difficult situation and she needed to keep her mind on the mission. But, dear Lord, it was hard to set aside that hurt, abandoned, little girl and be a warrior. Ian knew her well. Invoking her determination to prove that she could do this job was the one thing that would move her beyond the pain of her father's rejection.

She took a deep breath and nodded her thanks to him. A tiny smile curved his lips briefly.

"Okay, you two. You heard the boss. You're coming with us," Granville announced.

"Coming where?" she asked as casually as she could muster.

"On a ride."

Yikes. That didn't sound good. Unfortunately, Granville and his partner were too well trained. Instead of each man approaching a chair from behind to untie them simultaneously, Granville untied first her, then Ian, while the other guy stood well back out of arms' reach, his weapon pointed at them. No chance, then, for her and Ian to overpower their captors, or for her to overpower Granville and free Ian.

She made brief eye contact with Ian and he shook his head faintly in the negative. Message received. Now wasn't their moment. Weird how she'd come to trust his instincts so implicitly.

"Okay, boys. Where to?" she asked jovially as Ian was herded to his feet and his hands tied behind his back. She was scared half to death, but she only had a few minutes to reestablish some kind of rapport with these old comrades of her father's and maybe save Ian's life and hers.

"You're going for a helicopter ride," Granville announced.

"Cool!" she gushed. "Speaking of which, what are those whacky steps for on the side of it?"

Her captor grinned at her. "You're gonna find out firsthand in a few minutes. Go on, now. Don't make your daddy mad."

Ian's gaze snapped to her in sharp question. As they made the long walk out to the chopper, he murmured, "You old man ever lay a hand on you?"

Really? They were possibly about to die and that was what he wanted to talk about? "Yeah," she answered impatiently. "From time to time."

Something cold and final flickered in Ian's gaze. "Noted."

Something warm and fuzzy flickered in her heart in return. If she wasn't mistaken, Joseph Brothers had just earned himself a big can of whup-ass from Ian down the road. But then reality set in. Her father never, ever let go of a grudge. She muttered back to Ian, "It's not worth it. I'm who I am now, and regardless of how I got that way, I'm good with myself. Let it go."

"Sorry, babe. Kids and animals," he ground out.

"Excuse me?"

"Kids and animals. In my world, they're off limits for abuse, neglect, mistreatment, or emotional pain."

She liked the sound of his world. Too bad the both of them likely only got to live in it for a few more minutes. They arrived at the helicopter and she noted that a logo had been freshly stenciled on the side of the chopper. The local electrical power company's name wreathed the logo. What was up with that?

Granville gestured her and Ian to climb in the back of newly painted bird. When her father had said to dump them in the desert, did these guys actually interpret that to mean shoving them out of a helicopter from hundreds or thousands of feet in the air?

Jimmy, Granville's cohort in crime, poked her in the back with his rifle. "Get in," the younger man bit out.

"Jeez, Jim. Your mom would have your head if she knew you were pushing me around. I babysat you, for goodness' sake. Relax. We're all friends, here." She scrambled awkwardly around the metal stair assembly welded to the skid and climbed into the helicopter's cargo bay. She flopped down on the floor and Ian flopped down with a grunt beside her.

"You okay, babe?" she asked him.

His gaze swiveled to hers. "Did I mention your family's a little out there?"

They traded grins that she hoped their captors interpreted as either ignorance or outright dimwitted unawareness of the trouble the two of them were in.

The pilot yelled into the back. “Everybody strapped in?”

Granville flashed a thumbs up.

“Hang on, then,” the pilot shouted. “Let’s go make some history!”

Ian didn’t like the sound of that. He and Piper were going to be history soon if they didn’t do something radical to change the odds against them. Thing was, these guys were all military or para-military trained. And cautious. They weren’t making the kinds of amateur mistakes he could exploit. With a gun pointed at Piper, his hands were tied. Both literally and figuratively. He wasn’t willing to do anything that might get her shot.

She was doing a fantastic job of building rapport with their captors, of reminding them that she was one of them, that they were all on the same side. Friends. Family. But if he overpowered Jimmy and shot Granville, all bets were off as to what would happen to her.

Frankly, he was curious to see what, exactly, these guys were planning to do. Assuming the bastards didn’t push them out of the helicopter before they showed their hands.

It was a calculated risk to sit here in the thwocking helicopter. He could only hope that Piper would understand how vital it was to figure out what these guys were up to. The first shoe—the virus outbreak—would go active in Las Vegas any time, now. And these guys were the other shoe. What in the hell did El Noor have up his sleeve?

He glanced out the window in the helo’s sliding cargo door and oriented himself based on the sun. They were headed south. Maybe a little to the east. Not toward Las Vegas? What the hell?

Granville shouted over the engine and rotor noise, “This won’t take long. A few minutes to get there and ten or fifteen minutes to set the charges.”

Set the charges? That didn’t sound good.

Piper yelled, “What are you going to blow? The Hoover Dam?”

Christ. She was right. They were headed straight for the gigantic structure.

“Nah. It would take all the dynamite in the West to blow up that puppy. We’re after something better. The power lines running from the dam to Vegas.”

Mother of God.

He slammed backward against the bulkhead behind him. Of course. Blowing up high power lines, if done correctly, would create a massive power surge down the lines sure to fry everything connected to the electric grid. From toasters to light bulbs, generators to air conditioners, everything on the grid would be destroyed. An electro-magnetic pulse would not only knock everything off line, but would melt the internal workings of all things electrical that happened to be plugged in.

He was probably not successful at fully masking his horror. These guys were going to make an unholy mess of Las Vegas.

The virus. Oh. Shit. These guys were timing their attack for just when the virus finished incubating and people started to get sick. It would be 120 degrees in the shade, and a whole bunch of people were about to come down with a deadly infection. In a town completely without power. It was a brilliant—dastardly—plan.

At least cars and airplanes would continue to work. People could drive out of town. That was a small blessing.

Piper moaned under her breath beside him. She’d put it all together, too, apparently.

“Gentlemen,” he asked calmly, “are you aware that about a week ago another terrorist attack was launched on Las Vegas?”

Jimmy leaned forward aggressively. “We ain’t terrorists!”

“My mistake,” he corrected. “Nonetheless, last week, a Palestinian terrorist released a deadly virus in Las Vegas. Any minute now, thousands of people are going to become violently sick and commence dying.”

“So?” Jimmy retorted belligerently.

“You’re about to cut off power to the whole damned town,” Ian explained. “Whoever paid you to launch this attack is using you. You’re only one part of a much larger *terrorist* attack on Las Vegas.”

Granville had the decency to look worried. But ole’ Jimmy just leaned back and smiled a little. “Guess all them folks in Vegas shouldn’ta got so dependent on technology, now, should they?”

Piper cried, “They’re tourists, Jim. And families. Lots and lots of regular people live in Las Vegas. Families. Children. And they’re all going to die!”

Easy, Piper. Undersell the threat. Let them arrive at the understanding on their own of how devastating their power outage was going to be. He sent her a warning glance and hoped she caught his underlying message to take it slow and gentle.

She subsided, leaning against his shoulder. Granville had not tied her wrists together, and one of her hands crept behind his back as she cuddled up to him. Her fingers started groping at the knots. After a few seconds, she started to pluck at the ropes.

Even if she did get his hands free, he probably couldn’t overpower both guys back here and point a gun at the pilot before the bastard turned around and shot him and Piper with his sidearm. Not to mention, the helo could crash in the maneuver to overpower the pilot. If they were a few thousand feet up in the air, he’d be more inclined to try it. But the ‘copter was barely

skimming over the weeds and rocks of the southern Nevada desert. There was no margin whatsoever for error.

Not to mention, Piper could get shot. It was a damned inconvenient moment to reach the realization that he did not want to see her get killed, even if it was in the line of duty. He must have felt this way for a long time...since before he went into that burning building to save her and let the Scientist slip away. Well, crap. That made this whole mess just that much messier.

The helicopter slowed, its tail lifting up as it decelerated. "We're here," Granville announced. "The lines are below us."

The third guy, who'd been silent until now, stood up. "You're on the winch, Jimmy. Granville, you're on the stairs. Just like we practiced."

Ian swore silently. The bastard sounded like a trained para-rescue jumper. Which meant he couldn't expect any mistakes out of the guy. Ian had to give Piper's father credit. The bastard ran a tight terrorist attack.

Piper continued to pick at his knots while the helicopter established a hover, the cargo door was opened, and a winch arm swung out the door into position. The quiet guy in the harness guy hooked onto a safety line of some kind.

Ian noticed it was not the usual steel cable, however. It looked like some sort of nylon climbing line, instead. Frowning, he watched Granville lie down on the floor of the helo and lean out, releasing hooks and flipping down the extra steps. What in the hell were they planning to do with four steps down to thin air?

"Ready back here!" Granville shouted to the pilot as he heaved himself back into the copter and upright. "Bring her down easy, ten feet."

The helicopter commenced descending slowly. All Ian saw was desert, but from her vantage point, Piper had a better view. She leaned close to his ear to breathe, "High tension power lines."

Harness guy hefted a heavy backpack over one shoulder, checked the safety line one last time, and stepped out onto the aluminum stairs.

In about ten seconds, the plan became clear. Harness guy stood on the lowest step and was able to lean out and reach the actual power line. A faint smell of ozone permeated the air, and Ian fancied that he felt the electro-magnetic field of the high-power line crackling across his skin.

Harness guy knelt on the bottom step and carefully attached what looked like an explosive cutting charge with a sophisticated trigger device to the power line itself. Theoretically, without being grounded, neither the helicopter nor its occupants could be electrocuted. But it was still as scary as hell to watch Harness Guy work on the high-power lines. The chopper hovered over each of the half-dozen lines in turn.

"Next spot. About 250 feet down the line!" Harness Guy yelled.

Yup. If a big chunk of the line were blown out all at once, that would make for a massive EMP—electromagnetic pulse. Timers would undoubtedly cause the charges to blow with the exact synchronicity required.

One by one, the second set of charges was set on each of the huge power lines that were the energetic lifeblood of Las Vegas. It took nearly a full, nerve-wracking hour to set them all. But finally, Harness guy stepped back into the helicopter.

The steps were secured, the winch pulled in, and the door shut in under a minute. The helicopter lifted away from the power lines, and when it had another fifty feet or so of clearance, banked hard off to the north and accelerated fast.

Granville commented helpfully, "We gotta get away from the line when it blows so it won't knock us out of the sky."

Gee. That was generous of them not to stick around and suffer the fate of their victims.

"When we get a good ways out into the desert, we'll put you two out. If you're smart and remember what your daddy taught you, Piper, you two should be able to make it to the nearest town."

"What will you guys do?" she asked.

"After the second charge blows, the rest of us will go home."

"What 'rest' of us?" she asked sharply.

"Aww, honey. I'm sorry to be the one to break it to you. Your daddy insisted on flying the second plane."

She frowned, not understanding. But in Ian's gut, a foreboding took root. Granville didn't answer and she repeated more urgently, "What's my dad going to do with the second plane?"

Ian answered gently. "The fixed wing plane has a bomb in it. He's planning to blow it up."

She frowned for a second more, and then it hit her. "With himself in it?" she gasped.

Granville looked grief-stricken.

"No!" she shouted. She started to surge up out of her position on the floor, but Ian leaned back hard, trapping her arm between his back and the bulkhead.

"Stop, Piper," he said low and urgent. "There's nothing you can do."

"But he's going to die!"

Jimmy interjected, "Someone has to take out the city's back-up generators when they kick online. And the cars and airplanes. Have to stop those, too."

Aww, hell. The bastards.

The EMP burst down these power lines would take out all the primary systems in town. Piper's father would no doubt wait a little while after the power line explosion and then take off in the small plane, giving hospitals and hotels plenty of time to

bring online all their emergency generators. Then Brothers would fly over downtown Las Vegas and blow up himself and his bomb, creating a second, air-burst EMP that would take out everything that the line burst had missed.

The thoroughness of this attack was breathtaking. And in conjunction with the viral attack...genuinely evil.

Ian frowned. He'd done his best to disable the bomb, but there was no guarantee that his hasty rewiring job had a) not been discovered or b) worked.

He and Piper had to get out of this helicopter alive. Had to find a way to warn the authorities. They *had* to stop these paired attacks.

"The timers are activated. They'll blow in one minute," Harness Guy shouted forward to the pilot.

On cue, the bird slowed and descended. Getting below the horizon, no doubt, so the line-of-sight wave of electromagnetic energy wouldn't kill its electrical systems. An urge to do serious harm to these guys nearly overcame Ian. Only the desperate urgency of needing to save the people of Las Vegas stopped him from attacking everyone in this bird, consequences be damned.

Piper was back to picking at his knots with her hidden hand. And the urgency with which she did it indicated that she felt the same way he did.

"Okay kids. Time for you to go," Granville announced. He threw open the cargo door and lowered the steps quickly.

The tug of the ropes around his wrists was less. Piper had the knots loosened, but not completely released. Jimmy and Harness Guy hauled him to his feet while Granville helped Piper to hers.

"Out you go," Granville said kindly. "Watch that last step. It's a bitch."

Piper laughed unwillingly beside him. The helicopter was still a good twenty feet up in the air. She looked over at him in distress.

"Just give it a good parachute landing fall roll when you hit the ground," Ian said encouragingly. "You go first. I'll be right on your heels."

"We'll go together," she declared.

He followed her down onto the step. The rotor wash made her stagger and he used his shoulder to steady her while he frantically yanked at his ropes. He had to have his arms free to fall safely. They needed to control their landings carefully or they could get seriously hurt in this little maneuver. The bastard pilot wasn't going any lower to increase their odds of survival, either.

"All right then. Down you go," Granville ordered.

One last, desperate pull and Ian felt the rope start to fall off his wrists. Thank God. Pretending to keep his hands tied behind his back, he shouted, "On the count of three. One." He shook off the rope. "Two." His arm shot out and he snatched Harness Guy's backpack up from its spot just inside the door. "Three!"

He jumped.

The impact when Piper hit the ground was incredible. It jarred her teeth in her head and it felt like every bone in her body bent a little to absorb the violent blow. She hit feet first, then twisted and fell to impact her knees, hips, then shoulder. Her momentum was such that her feet flew over her head and she did a full back somersault before coming to a stop.

If she'd had any breath before she jumped, she darned well didn't have any now. She lay there, gasping like a dying fish for what seemed like a long time. In reality, it was probably no more than a few seconds. Finally, she was able to pull in a painful breath.

Ian. Was he okay?

She sat up and looked around. Grit and sand flew everywhere as the helicopter accelerated away from them overhead. She threw her arm over her face until the sandblasting subsided.

Ian was just standing up. She half-ran, half-stumbled over to him and flung herself into his arms. He grunted in pain and his left arm did not come up to encircle her.

"What's wrong?" she asked quickly.

Through clenched teeth, he ground out, "Think I dislocated my shoulder. When I grabbed for the bag, it threw me off balance and I came down funny."

"What bag?"

"I grabbed Harness Guy's pack on the way out the door. No idea what's inside, but I figured there must be something useful in it."

She felt his shoulder gingerly, but every time her fingers moved to a new spot Ian winced. It must be hurting him like hell for him to show her any glimpse of weakness. It definitely felt like stuff was not in the right place inside the joint.

"I don't know how to put it back in the socket," she said regretfully.

"I'll talk you through it. It takes a fair bit of strength, and I'm going to swear like a motherfucker and maybe pass out. But you have to do it anyway."

She listened closely as he explained the relatively simple procedure. It was all about getting his arm bones properly positioned and then shoving like hell. The idea of doing it grossed her out completely, though. There was a reason she wasn't in the medical profession.

"Got all that?" he asked.

She nodded and gulped. If she could run around Khartoum with a gun and jump in front of violent religious police, she could do this. In theory.

He sat down and she knelt beside him. Laying her hands on his arm as he helped her position the limb and then braced himself, she muttered, "Ready?"

"Yeah."

"On the count of three. One--" She shoved. No sense making the guy wait till three, and frankly, she thought she might lose her nerve if she waited two more counts.

The joint popped audibly, and as advertised, Ian swore up a blue storm. Sweat erupted on his brow and his entire body trembled. Lord, the pain he must be in. "I'm so sorry!" she cried.

"No prob," he gritted out. "Gimme a sec."

Out of respect for his fight to control the pain, she turned away. In her experience, men didn't like to look sissies in front of women. While he caught his breath, she occupied herself rummaging through the backpack he'd snagged.

A variety of tools, including a large pocketknife could come in handy. There was a plastic tarp, which would definitely be handy if they had to collect water for themselves out here. And speaking of which...she pulled out a canteen that sloshed

heavily. Yes.

“I found some water, Ian. Drink.”

He took a long slug from the canteen and passed it back to her, saying, “Finish it.”

She did as he suggested. Survival 101: it was better to carry water inside your body than outside it.

The sun beat down on them mercilessly, and she was already starting to feel baked. She knew not to fight the heat mentally.

There was nothing she could do about it, so she might as well just accept it and move on.

Ian climbed carefully to his feet. “Give me the pack.”

“I just put your shoulder back in joint. I don’t need the pack to pull it back out.”

“I’ve got two shoulders. I’ll sling it over the other one. I’m stronger than you, and me carrying the bag will equalize out our speed and stamina a bit.”

“God, I hate it when you’re right,” she muttered.

He laughed a little. “Sorry, babe. You’re in my world, now. This is what I do.”

“And you would be crazy for doing it.”

“One man’s crazy is another man’s idea of a good time,” he retorted.

“I gather then, that you’re going to be all right?”

“Right as rain. I’ve done a lot worse to myself than that and kept going.”

“Okay, Mr. I’m-in-my-element. What’s the plan?”

“We’ve got to get word back to the authorities to shoot down your old man’s plane in case my modifications to the bomb don’t stop it from blowing up.”

“I think that ship has already sailed,” she replied soberly.

A knife of pain stabbed her gut, and she forcibly set it aside. Not now. Not yet. First, they had to survive the killer desert they’d been dropped into. Then they had to stop Yusef Abahdi’s virus from killing thousands. Then...then, she could grieve her father and maybe unravel her complicated feelings about the man.

“Any idea where we are?” she asked.

“Assuming the helicopter made a forward speed of no more than, say a hundred miles per hour away from the power lines, we’re about twenty miles north of the power lines.”

She frowned. “Then we aren’t that far away from Overton. We should be able to head northwest and run into it.”

“Theoretically,” he replied. “Assuming we don’t die of exposure or dehydration, or miss it and end up heading past it into the desert.”

“We’re already in the desert, big guy.”

He smiled ruefully “Is there anything made of cloth in the bag?”

“A t-shirt.” She pulled out the white cotton garment wadded in the bottom of the bag.

“That’ll work. Tear off pieces of it so we can cover our heads, faces, and necks.”

“There’s a knife in here, too,” she commented as she commenced sawing off big pieces of cotton from the front and back of the shirt. She tied the cotton square low over her forehead, covering as much skin as she could. Ian drew a corner forward and draped it loosely across her face, leaving only her eyes exposed.

“It’s hot,” she complained.

“Believe me. It’s better than the sunburn alternative. And, the white fabric reflects sunlight. You’ll ultimately be cooler.”

“Too bad there’s not a cell phone in the bag,” she commented.

“No matter,” he replied. “The cell towers all over this region went down the second those power lines blew up.”

“I can’t imagine what’s going on in Las Vegas right now,” she said grimly.

His reply was equally grim. “The lights all just went out, and all the air conditioning went off. People are complaining and pulling out their cell phones, and only now realizing they don’t work, either. The stop lights will blink red until their internal batteries go out, and traffic will be a mess. Which will freeze the cars in place until your Dad and his little bomb can knock out all their internal electronics and kill them.”

She asked heavily, “Any idea how long it takes for back-up generators to kick in?” Not long after they did, her father would undoubtedly blow himself and his plane up. No reason for him not to kill himself as efficiently as he’d done everything in this attack of his, so far.

Ian looped his good arm around her shoulders and gave her a hard squeeze that was more an exhortation to be strong than an actual hug. “The casino back-up systems will come up a few seconds after the initial EMP because of all the security systems they use.” A pause, and then he added low, “He won’t feel a thing. It’ll be instantaneous.”

She buried her face against his chest momentarily. Her father was about to blow himself up and there wasn’t a thing she could do to stop it. “He wasn’t even a good father,” she mumbled.

“But he was the only one you had. And that makes it hurt. You’re allowed to grieve his loss, Piper.”

“It’s stupid. I’ve spent my whole life rebelling against him. Why would I shed tears for him now? He doesn’t deserve them, dammit!”

Ian replied gently, "Conserve the water if you can, sweetheart, and don't cry."

She sighed. "I know. We'd better get going. How far do you think it is?"

"Ten miles. Maybe twenty." He made that sound like a walk in the park. But she knew better. She already felt like she was overheating dangerously, and they hadn't started moving, yet. And his shoulder had to be killing him.

Ian shouldered the pack on his good side and took the lead.

To say it was hot didn't capture the true experience. They were in Hell. And exercising strenuously. If she'd thought Khartoum had been hot, it was nothing compared to this blazing inferno.

Ian's voice floated back to her. "You did great earlier, Piper."

"Huh?"

"You managed the PHP guys brilliantly. They were prepared to kill us until you diffused the situation."

"Wait. You're complimenting me?"

A chuckle came over his shoulder. "I happen to think you're a fine operative. And now that I've seen how fucked up your background is, I'm all the more impressed with who you've managed to become."

"Okay, you have to help me out here. Was that a compliment or not? The background bit could be taken either way."

He stopped and turned in that deceptively quick way he had of moving, and she all but ran into him. He grabbed her arm to steady her, and said, "I'm trying to tell you I think you're amazing."

"Okay, now I *know* we're dying. Give it to me straight, Ian. How much time have we got left?"

He laughed and squeezed her nose playfully through her cotton facemask. Commencing walking again, he said thoughtfully, "If we got exposed to the virus two days ago, I'm guessing we've got about five days left before we get sick. Any preference how we spend it?"

"Hmm. We're not far from Lake Tahoe. I hear it's gorgeous. Maybe we could go up there to spend our final days."

"It is tempting to chuck all this stuff and just spend our remaining time together, isn't it?"

She was staggered to hear that out of Mr. Mom-and-Apple-Pie. "Tempting, yes," she answered carefully. "But I know you. Never in a million years would you walk away from your duty. You'll die in the harness before you give up pulling."

"Ox analogy aside—thanks," he muttered.

"You're welcome."

"You can go if you want," he offered. "When we get back to Overton, I'll find you a ride away from Las Vegas and the virus. In fact, I'll feel better if you do go."

"And I'll feel better if you come with me," she replied tartly.

"I've got to see this through."

"As do I," she responded.

"I'll focus better on what has to be done if I'm not worrying about you constantly," he retorted.

"Fine. Then I guess we'll just have to work together so we always know where the other one is and we don't worry about each other."

He half-turned, clearly to argue, but then exhaled hard. "You're right."

"Say that again?"

He glared at her humorously. "You heard me the first time."

"Can't bring yourself to let those words pass your lips twice in under a minute, huh? Heck, you're almost fun to be stranded with in the desert, roasting alive. If I ever need to go to Hell, I'll be sure to bring you along."

That made him laugh outright. "Deal."

They started walking, and a strange calm came over her. It was as if out here, all alone, with nothing but dirt and rocks as far as the eye could see, they were in a world apart from reality. Their own private universe. Who'd have thought a vast expanse of dirt and rocks could feel so intimate?

They walked for a while in as companionable silence as she supposed was possible given the horrendous conditions. Under normal circumstances, they would never try to move in this heat. They would find shade, hunker down, and conserve body moisture until the sun went down and temperatures fell. But her father and a mysterious terrorist calling himself El Noor had made that impossible.

So hot she was getting lightheaded and dizzy, she distracted herself by asking, "Who do you suppose EL Noor is?"

"No idea. I'd sure like to find the guy, though. But he's a problem for another day. Right now, we have to find civilization."

"And pray your tampering with my father's bomb disabled it," she added fervently.

The next four hours were the longest of her life. Each step was more painful than the last as the bottoms of her feet burned inside her shoes. She developed a pounding headache, and she didn't want to think about how dehydrated she was becoming. She and Ian had covered every inch of skin they could by rolling down their sleeves and pulling up their collars. They even wrapped their hands in the remnants of the white t-shirt. It made her feel a thousand degrees hotter, even though intellectually she knew the coverings ultimately to be helpful in cooling her body.

For his part, Ian didn't complain even once. He grunted now and then when he jostled his shoulder particularly hard,

testament to the extreme pain he had to be in. But he soldiered on, picking out a trail headed generally northwest and skirting around big boulders and occasional cactus. They only had to scale one ridge of any consequence. But when they reached the top, she actually had to ask Ian to stop so she could catch her breath. The heat was taking far more of a toll on her than she'd realized.

If only they could climb into a walk-in freezer and cool their bodies off. She tried to pretend she was shivering with cold, but it didn't work. She tried to remember the last time she'd been ice cold. It had been in Yusef's lab in the Sudan until the fire destroyed the unit. An industrial-sized air conditioner had cooled the basement and no doubt scrubbed the air for any errant virus material that might have escaped its petri dish.

She pictured herself floating in that chilly space like a tiny speck of Ebola, cooled until she turned into an ice crystal—

"Ian. I think I just figured out how to stop, or at least slow down, the virus in Las Vegas."

"How's that?"

"Viruses crystalize when they go into a dormant state. They can stay that way indefinitely. In fact, some virus, once crystallized, never become actively infectious again."

"So scientists need to find a way to get Yusef's virus to crystallize. How? By the time they research it, everyone in Vegas will be dead."

"What if Yusef gives us the answer?"

"He won't talk. If the guy's willing to sacrifice his own daughter rather than talk, he'll definitely take his secrets to the grave."

"What if he already gave us the answer?"

Ian stared at her intently. "Meaning what?"

"Ebola is highly sensitive to cold. It only survives and stays active for long periods of time outside human bodies in tropical temperatures."

Ian frowned. "Continue this line of reasoning."

"There was a huge air conditioner blowing into Yusef's lab in the basement of that house. What if he was using the cold air to protect himself while he worked? I didn't see any hazardous materials suits down there, or even any self-contained breathing apparatus. How did he work with the virus so closely for so long and not catch it himself, unless he was protecting himself in some way?"

Ian nodded. "There was an abnormally large air conditioner in the bedroom he and his daughter slept in, too. The room was cold, even with the fire starting to engulf the house."

She nodded eagerly. "That makes sense. If they could spend most of their time in air too cold for the virus to go live, he and his daughter would be safe against the virus." She frowned. "Although...he seemed to be devoted to her. I can't imagine him letting her anywhere near his lab unless he had a cure of some kind..."

"Go on. Where does that logic take you?"

"If I were a scientist designing and handling a weaponized virus, wouldn't I build in a vulnerability? Or at least a back-door cure of some kind? If not for the public to discover, to protect myself and my beloved child?"

"Like computer designers building in quick, secret ways to get into a program's software?" Ian asked.

"Exactly. He would have spent months researching the virus. If it has a weakness, he'll have found it. Did you see anything when you were in the house that looked like preventative treatment of some kind? Syringes? Medication bottles?"

Ian's expression lit. "There were these little blue bottles in the bathroom. A row of them, mostly empty."

"What was in them?"

"I don't know. But they had Arabesque writing. It looked like this." He cast around for a narrow shard of stone and started drawing from memory in the sand. She sounded out the Farsi script as he wrote it.

"Silver. Colloidal silver," she announced.

"What the hell is that?"

"Silver ions are antimicrobial in nature. It kills bacteria sufficient concentrations, too. The human body doesn't react much to it, so it's not dangerous to ingest."

"Well, Abahdi and/or his kid were downing it in quantity based on the row of empty bottles of it that I saw. The daughter had them lined up all along her window sill and all over the top of the air conditioner."

"What if the virus has some sort of vulnerability to ionized silver?" she speculated. "It would be easy enough to dump a bunch of colloidal silver into the water supply of Las Vegas, for example, and to treat everyone all at once."

"If people washed down surfaces with silver treated water, would that kill the virus, too?"

"Maybe. It would have to be tested."

"So...what?" Ian asked. "We cram everybody in Las Vegas into a hotel, turn the a/c up full blast, and have them drink gallons of silver-treated water?"

Their stares met as comprehension exploded in their brains at the same instant. She spoke first. "That's why the PHP had to knock out all the power in the city. To prevent people from hanging out in cold buildings that slow or stop the airborne virus."

Take out all the cooling in a desert city in August, and the virus can run wild.”

Ian’s voice was grim. “This El Noor bastard went looking for some patsy who could be convinced to knock out all the power in Las Vegas and came up with you father and his Luddite cronies.”

They stared at each other in grim satisfaction at having solved the mystery. Two separate attacks from two entirely separate sources, originating outside Las Vegas, but crossing paths like a giant X right on top of the city. Combined, the attacks stood to kill tens or hundreds of thousands of people.

“It’s a nightmare scenario,” she murmured.

“We’ve *got* to get word out to someone to get power back and try the silver thing,” Ian bit out.

They would find a way. They had to. They *had* to get word to the authorities to restore cooling to someplace in Las Vegas at all costs and get everybody in the city into the cold air immediately. Everybody’s lives depended on it.

As the sun began to set, they caught its full glare in their eyes, and she eventually resorted to hanging on to Ian’s belt and letting him lead her blind for stretches of up to several minutes in length.

“Hah,” he announced. “This way.”

“Have we reached civilization?” she asked hopefully, screwing her eyes shut against the blinding sun.

“Nope. But I spotted a broad-leafed yucca. I know a trick.” In a few seconds, he had broken two long, flat, leathery leaves about two inches wide and several feet long from the succulent. Using his knife, he made six-inch long slits in each leaf. He tied one of the leaves over her eyes like a blindfold. “Try that.”

The narrow slit let in just enough detail for her to see out but blocked most of the sunlight.

“Eskimo sunglasses,” he explained. “They use pieces of wood with carved slits to knock down glare off the ice, but the principle is the same.”

“Cool. Thanks,” she replied. She was getting short enough on breath that even speaking a few words was difficult.

“You’re doing great,” he muttered. “Another mile or two, we may spot a ranch or something.” Apparently, he didn’t have spare energy for talking, either.

Another hour saw the sun finally dip below the horizon. The pounding of her headache reduced from jackhammers to mere sledgehammers in her skull as the bright light and killer heat finally broke.

“There’s no food in the pack,” Ian said apologetically. “We can forage for something edible if you need it.”

“How far to town?” she asked, weighing the options.

“Don’t know. Couple miles, maybe.”

That didn’t sound too bad, now that the heat had dropped twenty degrees. Amazing the difference between 120 degrees in the sun and 100 degrees at twilight. She felt almost reborn. “I’m not worried about food. Time is the enemy right now. I say we walk another few hours. If we don’t bump into any buildings or roads, then we can make camp, set up a water collector, and think about food and shelter then.”

Ian nodded. He didn’t look like he wanted to stop any more than she did. Their information was vital. They had to share their guess about how to stop the killer virus.

She feared that the time would come when his superior stamina and strength would leave her in the dust. Then, they would have some hard choices to make. But in the mean time, she planned to do everything in her power to keep up with him and keep going.

When her steps flagged, the idea of being separated from Ian was enough to inject new energy into her exhausted muscles. She was *not* going to lose him. Not after they’d only just found each other.

Under normal circumstances Ian would put this shitty day right up there at the top of his list of days in his life that had purely sucked. Except for one thing. Piper'd said she loved him. And damned if she hadn't sounded like she'd meant, it, too.

The idea had distracted him enough that he'd actually been able to forget the terrible deadline they were working under for a few minutes at a time. He was even able to forget the throbbing pain in his shoulder from time to time. Which was saying something. The joint hurt like a bitch.

They were in big trouble. With no sign of water anywhere, they would survive maybe one more day in this blistering heat before one or both of them collapsed. And then they were done for. His only hope was to put on an everything's-fine face, pray for a miracle, and do his best to keep Piper in a positive frame of mind.

Ideally, they would walk all night and rest all day tomorrow. But time and that damned virus were against them. If they stopped before it cooled down too much tonight, they could set up a condensation collector with their tarp and gather a few ounces of water for themselves. And right now, every drop counted.

He marched Piper onward until he estimated it was about midnight. Then, he veered toward a long ridge of red volcanic rock he'd been paralleling for hours. It should be riddled with caves, which would provide a little shelter against the night cold still to come. Piper following, uncomplaining, but stumbling more often than before. Brave girl.

It didn't take long to find an overhang with some scrub bushes in front of it. And tonight, he wasn't picky about where they stopped. They just needed a small space in which to trap their body heat. Piper went to work piling rocks and brush up to mostly enclose the crevice while he dug a water pit with his bare hands and a flat rock he used like a spade. They spread their precious plastic tarp over the empty pit after centering an old tin can he'd found earlier underneath the tarp. He poked the center of the tarp down to a point so condensation that formed overnight on the underside of it would run down the plastic and drip into the can. Hopefully by morning they'd have a few swallows of water apiece.

Piper declared their shelter ready, and he crawled into the low space. She had cleared away all the rocks and gravel and laid out a bed of brush and smashed tumbleweed for them. She crawled in after him, and they cuddled on the surprisingly comfortable makeshift bed. Or maybe it just felt that good to lie down and quit moving at long last.

She groaned beside him. "How's your shoulder?"

"It'll be okay. Not high on the priority list at the moment."

"We're not going to make it out of here, are we?" she asked in a small voice.

He rolled onto his good shoulder and drew her close. Their breath mingled, and as their body heat did the same, he felt a little better. "I'm going to do my level best to get us out of this alive."

"That's not an answer."

He sighed. "It's the best I can do and still be honest with you."

She laid her palm against his cheek and leaned back enough in his arms to stare up at him in the near total darkness. "There's no need to sugar coat it for me. How bad is our situation?"

"If we don't find water tomorrow, we're going to be in a world of hurt. And it's not like we can just sit out here and hunker down to work at surviving. We've got to get to civilization and let the authorities know how to stop the virus. And tell them all to start looking for El Noor. That he—or she—is the mastermind."

They were silent for a few minutes, resting in each other's arms. She said reflectively, "If I have to die, I'm glad it's with you, Ian."

"We're not going to die!"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not giving up. Not by a long stretch. I'd give anything to live to a ripe old age with you. I'm just saying. If we both *have* to die, I'm glad you're here with me."

The idea of growing old with her rolled over him like a tidal wave. Yeah, he'd have liked that, too. Having some kids. A passel of grandkids who invaded his home on holidays with noise and laughter and the happy chaos he'd grown up with. Piper would make a hell of a mother, he'd bet.

He pushed her hair off her face to stare down at her. "Only thing you *have* to do is live. For me. For us."

She smiled up at him sadly. "I appreciate the pep talk. I really do. But I know the score. We've got about one more day, and then we'll die of dehydration. And if that doesn't get us, the virus will. This is the mission that was bigger than us. The one that got away. But hey. It was a good run. And I got to meet you before the end."

He would have cursed and raged and battered at her defeatist attitude if there was even the tiniest glimmer of hope that she was wrong. But as it was, he could only sigh and pull her closer to him. "You're a hell of a woman, Piper Roth."

"Thank you for not lying to me," she whispered, her words slipping into the night on silent wings.

"You're welcome."

"I do love you," she murmured low.

He absorbed the words into himself like healing water, cool and soothing to his soul. "I love you, too."

She went very still. "It's a hell of a note that we found each other now, huh?"

"Better late than never."

"Amen."

To have found Piper just in time to lose her, to lose his life, was hard to swallow with grace. But for her sake, he did his best. He wasn't about to give up on getting both of them out of this mess alive. He had to stay focused. But he couldn't resist repeating, "I love you."

Damn, it felt good to say that. Now, if only it weren't too late to act upon it.

Piper stared at Ian's shadowed profile in awe. Who knew three such simple little words could carry such profound meaning? She stared at him, letting his quiet, intense declaration of love and all the emotion and loss and discovery behind it sink into her soul.

She loved him, too. More than herself. More than life. This love filling her and spilling over into him felt bigger than both of them. Eternal. Sacred.

They might have failed in their mission, might have lost everything and merely be biding time until the end, but at least they'd found each other. And it was enough. She could die in peace.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for everything."

Ian snatched at Piper's arm as she staggered beside him. They'd walked through the pre-dawn hours and into the morning, taking shelter only when the temperature soared well over a hundred degrees and the sun climbed brutally overhead to beat down on them.

They'd each gotten about four ounces of water from their makeshift condensation still, but they needed thirty times that much to survive for long in this oven. He was starting to see things—lakes of water just ahead. People running towards them. Trees and birds where there could be none.

He knew hallucinations came with the latter stages of dehydration. Next up would be unconsciousness, and then, of course, death. If only he could find something, anything, that indicated where a trace of moisture could be found.

The gods might have given them last night together, but today, the gods were feeling cruel. There was no water. Anywhere.

He'd stopped worrying about the greater good of the residents of Las Vegas, and his entire world had narrowed down to just this moment. The two of them. Taking another step.

The sun finally set, and they moved out again. His muscles should have felt marginally rested after the break, but every hour the dehydration deepened, his feet and legs cramped more severely, and the pain in his head and eyeballs become more unbearable.

Every step was a herculean struggle to lift his foot and force it to slide forward. Piper wasn't in any better shape. They were just about to the end of their ropes. He feared they'd missed Overton, shooting too far to one side or the other of the small town and continuing to walk out into the great desert of central Nevada.

He'd pretty much decided that it was time to sit down, get comfortable, and give up the ghost when he saw it. A square shape on the horizon that was not nature-made.

Another mirage?

He squinted at the low, black rectangle. "Do you see something?" he asked Piper cautiously.

She peered at where he was pointing feebly. "Is that a house?" she rasped.

He let out a breath of relief he didn't know he'd been holding. He was not crazy, and he was not seeing things. Thank God. It was a building of some kind, tucked at the base of the ridge they'd been paralleling for the past hour. Odds were it was abandoned, but it meant shelter, at least, for the two of them.

"Is that a farm of some kind?" she asked.

"Hope so."

"Do you think it has a phone?"

"Hell, I'll be thrilled if it has a well."

"Good point." A pause. "How far away is it?"

He eyed the low shape, which had resolved into two structures, both long and low, one larger than the other. House and barn, maybe? "Half-mile," he guesstimated. "Twenty minutes." At full strength, they could make it in ten. But at the shambling pace they were managing now, not a chance.

That turned out to be a good estimate. And, indeed, a dilapidated house and a more dilapidated barn rose out of the desert grit. If nothing else, a pale ribbon of driveway wound in the other direction in the moonlight, presumably joining up with a road of some kind. They were close to civilization. Or at least, they knew how to find it, now.

"Looks abandoned," Piper announced, sounding disappointed.

"It would be too easy if we just walked up to a house and were able to call for help," he replied. No shitty mission like this ever caught a break like that.

The closer they got, the more abandoned the place looked. The window panes were cracked and the front door wasn't

hanging quite right. He knocked anyway and shouted a hello. Only the blowing wind whispered back to him. He pushed the front door open.

Oh, yeah. It was abandoned. A few pieces of cobweb and dust covered furniture remained, but trash littered the floor along with plentiful rat droppings.

“Great,” Piper commented drolly. “If we don’t die of Yusef’s virus, we can catch hantavirus from the rat poop in here and die from that, instead.”

He grinned over at her in the dark space and headed for the kitchen. If there was a phone or water to be had, that would be where they found both. An old rotary phone did hang on the wall, but there was no dial tone. Not that he was surprised. He was more disappointed when a twist of the faucets on the sink yielded no water.

“Let’s try the barn,” he suggested.

They went back outside and headed for the other building. The faint moonlight made this place look even spookier than it already would have with its falling down fences and odd tumbleweed drifting through, ghostlike.

He put his good shoulder into shoving open the big sliding door and Piper slipped past him as he took a minute to gasp in pain.

“Bingo!” she crowed.

He stepped into the gloom. Sonofagun. A tractor. Old, rusty, and cobweb covered, but a tractor.

“Think it runs?” she asked.

“Doubtful,” he replied as she hoisted herself up onto the seat. She pushed and pulled at clutches and throttles, and turned the key, which was conveniently in the ignition. Nothing. He was not surprised.

He was surprised, however, when she jumped down and moved to the cowl at the side of the engine, lifted it in a cloud of dust, and pointed the flashlight from the backpack at the motor. “You know diesels?” he blurted.

“You’ve met my father, right? Of course, I do.”

He moved over to stare into the engine compartment. He knew a little about diesel engines, himself. “There are a bunch of tools over on the wall and the ones in the backpack. Thing we might be able to get it running?” he asked.

“Worth a try. Riding it to town sounds a hell of a lot better than hiking. And this doesn’t look to be in that bad a shape. I think we’ll need to blow out the fuel lines and clean the distributor cap at a minimum. Help me turn this shaft manually to see if it has seized or not.”

He grabbed the thick steel shaft she pointed at, and between the two of them they got it to move about a quarter-turn.

She nodded eagerly. “I think this may be salvageable.”

He poked around and found a lantern. A little kerosene sloshed around in the bottom of it and he got it going with help from the fire starter built into Harness Guy’s jackknife. That guy was going to be pissed to have lost this gear. But that’s what the bastard got for shoving them out of a damned helicopter.

“How about you start working on this while I go looking for water?” he said to Piper. Where there were people and animals, there was bound to be a water source of some kind.

She got to work pulling fuel lines and patching them up with a roll of duct tape she’d found, working by lantern light. He noticed Piper blinking hard from time to time like her vision was fuzzing out or she was fighting back severe head pain. They had to find water, soon, whether or not this tractor got running again. No telling if it had enough fuel in it to make it to the nearest town, and they couldn’t withstand another day in the killer heat without water.

He moved outside and spotted a broken-down windmill. A rusty trough stood beside it. The windmill must turn a well pump for animal drinking water. He examined the windmill, and although most of the fan blades were destroyed, the rest of the apparatus looked relatively intact. Awkwardly, he climbed the old, wooden tower some thirty feet up in the air. It was awful having to use his shoulder like this, but what choice did he have? Piper needed water.

He gritted his teeth against the throbbing pain and pushed on. He grabbed a broken fan blade awkwardly and gave the thing a good tug. It gave a loud squeal and turned sluggishly. He grabbed a higher blade and pulled again, groaning aloud in his agony. Another quarter turn.

Slowly, slowly, he managed to get the wheel turning. It was risky poking his hands between the jagged ends of the blades to continue turning the windmill, but he ignored the splinters and cuts and got the thing spinning at a reasonable clip. Anybody’s guess if turning this thing would actually bring up some water to the trough. He figured he turned the windmill for upward of ten minutes—long enough for both of his shoulders to be screaming and for his resolve to be wavering badly when he heard another sound.

A splash.

“Piper!” he yelled. “Quick. Bring the tarp!”

She came running and stopped in shock when she spotted him high off the ground.

“Catch the water!” he called down to her.

She darted forward, draping their plastic tarp under the spigot that was trickling water into the trough. “It’s nasty,” she announced.

“Pipes are probably rusted. Iron won’t kill us, and we can filter it before we drink it.”

“Do you need me to come up there and help?” she offered.

“No!” he replied sharply.

Working together, him turning the blades and her holding up the cupped tarp, they captured several gallons of red, ugly water. But it was water. And he was trained in all kinds of methods for making water safe to consume.

Exhausted, he climbed down the scaffolding. Piper pointed the flashlight at the water and he grinned broadly. “That’s just flakes of rust. If we give it an hour or two, the sediment will settle to the bottom, and we can skim the clean water off the top.”

“You’re assuming the water has no bacteria in it that would kill us or make us deathly ill,” she replied. “Not that I care at this point.”

“I think I can set up a distilling apparatus with the junk in the barn. In a few hours, we’ll have drinkable water.”

Piper made a sound suspiciously close to a sob.

“You’re holding up great,” he encouraged her. “Hang in just a little while longer.” He was used to giving pep talks to his men, but it was different with her. He hated that she was out here suffering with him. As she moved past him toward the barn, he held his arms out, and she turned into them gratefully. She belonged in his embrace, her body plastered against his like this.

When, exactly, had they become a couple? He’d been working alone when he met her, and she’d declared herself a lone wolf from day one. Now that he thought back, from the moment he’d spotted her spotting him back in her rifle sight, they’d been irrevocably linked. Stubborn, the two of them were. It had just taken a while for them to figure it out.

Jeez. He must be more dehydrated even than he realized if he was spinning off in these hyperboles of romantic reverie. They had work to do before they both keeled over. “I’d kiss you, but our lips would crack and bleed,” he murmured into her dusty hair.

“Thanks for the thought,” she mumbled back against his chest. “Kisses to you, too. Hot, sexy ones with tongue and bare skin and sweat and--.”

“I get the idea,” he chuckled. “And don’t distract me. Ready to get back to work?”

“No, but I’ll do it anyway,” she sighed. “I could use some help pulling out the battery. The leads are corroded and need cleaning. Then we have to pray the thing’s still got a little charge left in it.”

He smiled over at her as they walked back to the barn. Her voice had a note of new hope in it, as well. They might just make it out of this mess alive, after all. “I can always give Big Red a push down the road to get it turning over.”

“You? Push a tractor?” she exclaimed. “You know, the sad part is I wouldn’t put it past you.”

They traded smiles and stuck their heads into the guts of the disemboweled tractor together.

Once they’d wrestled the heavy battery out of the machine, he turned his newfound energy to building a distiller and starting a fire underneath it. Carefully, he ladled the precious water into his apparatus and waited for clean water to start dripping out. When he had about a half-cup of water collected in an empty tin can, he carried it over to Piper.

“Drink.”

“You drink it. You’re stronger than I am and more important to keep functional. One of us has to make it out alive and tell people how to stop the virus,” she retorted. So. She realized how close they both were to the end of their physical resources, too, huh? He should have known he couldn’t fool her.

He responded, “You’re the one who knows how to fix our ride out of here, and there will be more water for me in a few minutes.”

She relented and downed the hot liquid.

They took turns drinking doses of the water as it emerged from his distiller. And gradually, as they each put away upwards of a gallon of distilled water, they began to feel better. Almost human. His headache diminished to a dull throbbing, and he noticed that Piper moved more quickly, with more precision, as she worked on overhauling the tractor. For his part, he was able to pitch in and help with lifting the heavy parts and horsing them back into place as dawn approached and she finally started putting the engine back together.

Finally, the moment of truth was upon them. It was time to see if the tractor would run. “This may not work,” she warned as she climbed into the seat.

“If it doesn’t, we’ll hole up here today, distill a bunch of extra water, and head out at night fall.”

“Can we make love before we go?” she asked hopefully.

He laughed. “Honey, we can make love every night for the rest of our lives if you want.”

Her head snapped around as she stared at him. The rest of their lives? Whoa. Was he ready to go there? It was one thing to think the rest of their lives was going to be twenty-four hours. But now that they’d found water, they could be talking decades. Was he prepared to commit for a long, full lifetime? As in forever?

She turned the key in the ignition and the engine gave a mighty sputter. And went silent.

“Again,” he suggested.

She turned the key once more and the engine popped and smoked...and caught. It ran rougher than the desert outside, but it was by God running. She’d done it.

She announced, “I think if we give it a few minutes to burn the gunk out of it and get the good diesel fuel running through it, it’ll smooth out!”

He didn’t care. He would ride this sputtering, jerking wreck all the way to Khartoum if he had to. As long as they got out of this mess alive and together. He moved over to the big barn door and shoved it all the way open.

“Need a ride, sailor?” Piper called to him.

Grinning, he grabbed the backpack and the gallon jug of extra water he’d distilled earlier. He climbed up and sat on the fender of one of the big tires beside her. He had to duck as the tractor passed out of the barn, but the sky opened up overhead, the last stars of the night winking out of sight as they emerged from the barn.

They’d done it. They were going to live to see another day.

Piper guided the tractor down the long driveway and, as they approached an actual dirt road, called to Ian, “Which way?”

He pointed to the north. She turned the tractor onto the road and accelerated cautiously. She prayed her jerry rigs and taped together fuel lines would hold up long enough for this old wreck to reach a working telephone. And a shower. And a freaking walk-in freezer.

The temptation was great to shove the throttle to the forward stop, but she schooled herself to patience. Every yard of road they put behind them was one less she and Ian had to walk. She estimated they putt-putt-ed down the road at about eight miles per hour. A hot, dusty breeze blew in her hair, and even though the morning sun was bright, she felt a lightness and freedom of spirit she hadn’t felt in as long as she could remember.

They were in a hurry and they needed to get out of the desert and find a phone, but she was with Ian, they’d found water, they had transportation after a fashion, and they were *alive*. After coming so close to death in the desert, that word held a whole new richness of meaning for her.

Ian’s hand came to rest on her shoulder and she glanced up at him. He smiled down at her and then closed his eyes and threw his head back, lifting his face to the morning sun. He felt it, too. The special exultation of cheating death.

All the fear and doubt of the past few days fell away from her, leaving her feeling new. Reborn. Vibrantly aware of everything. Of the salty smell of sweat. The iron taste of the well water lingering on her tongue. Of the air heating rapidly against her skin. The vibration of the tractor through her feet. Even the tiniest details registered in this hyperaware state of hers. It was intense. Almost sexual.

No wonder Ian liked living on the edge if this was the end result of his missions. She could see how it might become addictive.

“I see pavement,” Ian announced.

“Praise the lord.”

“We may still be a ways from a town.”

“But we at least made it to civilization. And a car will drive past eventually,” she replied.

“Assuming this area isn’t totally quarantined and that the cars here didn’t get zapped, also.”

She patted the tractor fender. “That’s okay. We’ve got Big Red. It’s too old to be affected by an EMP.”

“I swear. If we make it out of this alive, I’m taking this tractor back to Pennsylvania, buying me a piece of land, and settling down to farm it. And I’m never leaving it again.”

She blinked up at him. “Really? You’d walk away from being a super-commando?”

He shook his head. “I’ve had some rough missions in my day, but this one takes the cake. And we’re still not in the clear. We’ve got to get someplace cold and get our hands on some of that silver stuff of yours.”

He was right. Celebration now would be premature. They reached the sun-bleached ribbon of gray asphalt, and she turned the tractor in the direction Ian pointed. To the northeast. They’d gone no more than a mile when a green road sign announced that Overton was three miles ahead.

“Can we start celebrating now?” she asked.

Ian shook his head. “Not yet. Phone. Water. Power. Cold.”

“Shower. Food. Bed. Sex,” she added to his list.

“Roger that, baby.”

An intersection loomed ahead, and Piper ran the stop sign, afraid of what would happen if she stopped Big Red and then tried to get it moving again. Not to mention the gas gauge was reading dangerously low, the needle bumping off the peg below the E as the tractor lurched along.

In another five minutes, a building came into sight. And then more buildings. A town. Overton. She reached up and took Ian’s hand, squeezing it convulsively. Had they done it? Had they made it out of Hell for real?

No traffic moved on the main street as they rolled into town. Crap. Had the place been evacuated or something? Surely, people ought to be out driving around at this time of day. It was mid-morning.

A man stepped into the street ahead of them. Waved his arms over his head at them. Big Red drew close enough for Piper to see the guy was wearing a police uniform.

“Stop the tractor!” the man called.

Gladly. Piper stepped on the breaks, which gave a hideous squeal. She turned off the ignition, and Big Red belched a mighty cough of smoke and gave up the ghost.

“We’re under quarantine folks. You have to leave town now, or I’m gonna have to arrest you—“

Ian jumped down off the tractor and turned to help Piper down. “Officer, we work for the government and need a telephone immediately. It’s a matter of national security. We may know how to stop the virus outbreak.”

The cop looked both startled and relieved. “Come on in the police department. We’ve got a phone working. This is a substation of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police and we have a dedicated underground phone line to headquarters.”

“Power’s out in Overton?” Piper asked. That might explain why no one had been moving around town. The lights were out and people were hunkering down to ride out the electrical outage.

“Yup. Went out a couple days ago. Everyone who could leave the area did. Headed for places with air conditioning and refrigerators,” the cop answered.

“Are cars in the area running okay?” Ian asked urgently.

Piper winced. If her father’s EMP bomb had exploded successfully, all the modern cars in the region with their internal computers and electronic ignition would be inoperative. Only ancient vehicles like Big Red, with its pre-electronic everything would continue to operate.

The cop frowned. “Yeah. Cars are fine. Why?”

“Thank God,” Ian responded fervently. “Phone first. And then we’re going to need a car. And you’re going to need to round up everyone in town and get them to the closest place with a big, cold air conditioner.”

The three of them walked toward a plain one-story building with a sign out front announcing it to be a LVMPD substation.

“Nearest place with power would be Las Vegas, sort of. They’ve got some back-up generators working around the city—the big casinos, hospital, airport, a few office buildings. But with the quarantine in place, no one gets in or out of there. Outside of Vegas, Caliente is the nearest town outside of the power outage zone, and it’s a couple hours north of here.”

“Get your locals up there and stick them in the coldest possible place you can find for—“ Ian turned to her. “How long would it take to make the virus go dormant?”

She shrugged. “Ebola goes dormant in under four hours of sustained cold. I’d say to give it twenty-four hours for safety’s sake.”

Ian turned back to the sheriff. “You heard the lady.”

It turned out the CDC field agents who’d gone into Las Vegas to attempt to isolate and identify the virus that had struck the city had set up a command post in the city’s police department.

Piper took the phone receiver Ian passed her and urgently relayed what she and Ian knew of the virus, and what they’d surmised about how to stop it. The CDC doctor was grateful and in a hurry to get off the phone to test the theories of external cold and internal colloidal silver. She handed the receiver back to the cop.

“Uhh, Piper? We have a small problem.”

She turned around to face Ian. His nose was bleeding.

Piper whipped around to face the cop. "I need a black-and-white with sirens, and I need it right now."

The cop moved over to a wall of car keys and pulled down a set. "It's parked out back."

Ian tilted his head back and she jammed about a half-box of tissue into his nose before guiding him toward the rear of the building. She called out to the lone cop in the building, "If you have any food or water you can send with us, that would be great."

She heard a vending machine disgorge cans and another one whirring as it sent food down to the slot below.

"He gonna be okay?" the cop asked, shoving an armload of soda cans, bags of chips, and candy bars at her.

She answered tersely, "Call the CDC. Tell them the virus is outside the containment area, and we're headed into Vegas."

"Shit!" The cop backed away from Ian hastily, eyeing both of them like lepers.

"Get your citizens and yourself into a place that's sixty degrees or below and stay there for a solid day. That'll kill the virus on your clothes and skin. I'm gonna have the CDC send some medicine up your way that we think will help infected people. You'll be fine!" she shouted over her shoulder as she herded Ian toward a cop car.

She guided him into the passenger seat and slid behind the wheel. Pulling the car into the street, she blasted the air conditioning for all it was worth, pointing every vent in the vehicle at Ian.

She drove onto the highway, flipped on the light bar and sirens, and floored the powerful engine.

"Easy Piper. I don't need to die on the road when we've made it this far alive."

"You're not dying on me, Ian McCloud. Do you hear me? That's not the virus. The inside of your nose got dried out and that's a regular old nosebleed. You hear me? I plan to make you marry me and have your children and die of old age together about a hundred years from now."

"Oh yeah?" he asked humorously. "How're you planning to make me marry you?"

Never taking her eyes off the road flying past, she bit out, "If the epic sex doesn't lure you in, I'll trap you with a pregnancy."

"That's not fighting fair."

"Love and war, big guy. Didn't you tell me that, once?"

He grinned past the wad of bloody tissues at her. "You think we can beat the virus after it's gone active?" he asked as the lights of a roadblock loomed ahead.

"Yes, I do. I think the man we apprehended loves his daughter enough to build in a back-door cure."

"I hope you're right," he said grimly.

She did, too. Fervently.

She decelerated the police car as they approached a road block manned by armed soldiers and Humvee's with machine guns mounted on them. A soldier with a machine gun slung over his shoulder approached her window. "You can't proceed, ma'am—"

She cut the guard off. "My partner's got the virus, and I'm taking him into the quarantine zone so he won't infect more people."

The soldier took a fearful step back from her window, and she stepped on the gas. Who was going to stop them from going *into* the fever zone? It wasn't like that soldier was going to jump into a Jeep and follow them to drag them back out.

"Just a little further," she told Ian as his nose commenced seeping blood again.

"You headed for the hospital?" he asked, his voice muffled behind the soaked tissues.

"I figure they're totally overwhelmed. Thought I'd head for the newest and swankiest casino in town. It's likely to have the best air conditioners and the biggest security system, hence the biggest back-up generators."

She headed for the Strip and pulled up in front of a luxurious hotel entrance. A man—a valet or doorman, maybe—yelled at her. “She’s got a bleeder in the car. Get him out of here!”

Ian swore under his breath.

In response, she popped the trunk release and hopped out of the cop car, muttering to him as she went, “Let’s see how well this puppy’s stocked, shall we?”

Ian nodded and climbed out as well. Blood trickled over his chin as she handed him a shotgun and a brace of pistols. For her part, she grabbed an automatic rifle and hefted its nylon strap over her shoulder.

“We’re Feds,” she announced, “and we can cure to the virus. We’re going into your hotel, and we’re giving the cure to you and everyone else inside. If you don’t believe me, I’ll kill you now.”

There was no way this punk was standing between Ian and cold air. None. She’d kill anyone and everyone who tried to get in her way. He was her man, the future father of her children, and no one was messing with her.

“Easy there, G.I.Jane,” Ian said from behind her. “It’s okay, buddy. I ran into a damned door as we were walking out to come over here. And we do have the cure. I’m gonna reach into my pocket nice and slow and pull out my military ID and show it to you. Okay?”

She glared at Ian. What was he doing?

“Keep glaring, baby,” he murmured low. “You’re bad cop. I’m good cop.”

Ahh. His comment broke her fixation on killing anyone who crossed her the wrong way. Right. These were civilians. The very people she and Ian had nearly died trying to save. No sense shooting them all, now. But still. The kid had better not try to stop Ian from getting inside to cold air...

“If you could take us to your head of security, we need to explain the procedure for decontaminating the hotel and everyone in it,” Ian told the kid.

Apparently, the fact that they wanted to see the very person the kid was hoping would show up and save him from these crazies seemed to ease the kid’s fears. “This way.”

The kid led them through the deserted lobby. Its cavernous interior looked garish in the silence and emptiness. “Security’s got everyone quarantined in their rooms,” the kid explained as he led them through the dark and silent casino.

They passed through an unmarked door into a long hall. And then, they passed through another set of doors into an abruptly brightly lit and alive command center. The hotel’s security hub.

Piper noticed that Ian had ditched the bloody tissues along the way and must have rubbed the blood off his face with his sleeve just prior to stepping in here.

“What the hell?” a guy in a suit exclaimed. Several men leaped to their feet, reaching for weapons at the sight of hers and Ian’s.

“Stand down, guys,” she said quickly, lowering her weapon as she spoke. “We’re here to help.”

She and Ian quickly went through who they were and what they’d learned of the virus.

The security man listened in silence and then responded with, “So all I have to do is cram everyone into a ball room, divert all the air conditioning in the building in there for a couple days. Then we have everyone drink water with this colloidal silver in it and wash in the stuff, and we’ll all live?”

Piper shrugged. “Maybe. The CDC is testing the silver theory as we speak. But I’m pretty sure the air conditioning should decontaminate any surfaces in the hotel.”

“Done!”

“In the meantime, my partner could use a stint in a meat locker if you have one with power.”

“Shit. He exposed?” the guy blurted.

She shrugged. “Something like that. Do you have a working walk-in refrigerator?”

“Yeah. The kitchens are on the main back-up generator.”

“Perfect. If we could get some warm coats and be shown to a frig, we’ll get out of your hair,” Piper said smoothly, taking a cue from Ian’s good cop routine. He’d said once, a lifetime ago, that she should learn how to use her gender as an asset and not fight against it. He was right. A little flirting and batting of her eyelashes, and the security guy led them to a fur coat store in the shopping arcade, let them have their pick of two expensive coats, and then led them through the huge kitchens into a walk-in refrigerator.

“Phone’s on the wall. Light switch here. You need anything; let us know.”

Ian piped up. “If someone could bring us bottles of water every few hours, and maybe a porta-potty, we’ll see you in a day or so. And thanks for everything.”

“No. Thank you. If this works, the hotel will owe you big. How do you feel about a free suite for life?”

First, they had to make sure they both lived long enough to take the guy up on his offer. The heavy, insulated door swung shut behind them. She turned to Ian, whose breath hung in the air in great, white puffs.

“Ironical that, after nearly roasting to death, now we get to flirt with freezing to death,” she murmured.

“Let’s just hope this works,” Ian replied. “I’ve got stuff to do and places to go.”

Only time would tell. They found a pile of insulation blankets like trucks used to help keep food cold and made a bed on the floor for themselves. It smelled like raw meat, but she didn't care. This *had* to work.

"We can take turns sleeping," she told Ian. "That way we won't die of hypothermia in our sleep. You go first. I'm feeling pretty good."

Which was to say, he was the one possibly dying from the virus.

About four hours had passed when the head security guy personally brought them food and pitcher of water. He also announced, "The CDC thinks this ionized silver stuff will kill the virus. Turns out the city had a bunch of it in a warehouse...left over from the anthrax scares after 9/11. The plan was to put it in the water supply back then, too, as a mass inoculant against anthrax. They've treated the city's water supply and are directing everyone to drink a gallon of tap water every day."

Ian grinned. "If it doesn't work, at least we'll all die with our kidneys in perfect working order."

Piper was humbled by his optimism and positive outlook. Even when things had looked bleakest in the desert, he'd never given up hope. She darned well wasn't going to give up on him, now.

The security man reported that everyone in the hotel was camping in a ballroom so the cooled air could be concentrated in that one spot, decontaminating the air they all breathed. It was cramped, and people were cranky, but they were all cooperating fully with the understanding that this was the best way to avoid dying.

The clock on the cell phone the security man left them on one visit to drop off more water crawled slowly toward the twenty-four hour mark. Piper was convinced the thing was running at half speed.

On his visit at the sixteen-hour mark, the security guy said that the CDC had a message for them. Their protocol showed early signs of working. Piper allowed her hope to grow a little bit more. And Ian actually smiled at her from time to time.

After twenty-four hours, when the freezer door opened, the security guy was not standing there. Instead, a doctor stood there. He drew blood from Ian and told them it would be tested for the killer virus. He said he would return as soon as he had the results, but he warned them it would take several hours. And he added that the two of them were rock stars outside their icy prison. They were being credited with saving thousands of lives.

She and Ian held hands inside the pocket of her coat for a long time after the doctor's visit. The seconds ticked by in silence in the stainless steel cube that had become their entire world. If they were incredibly lucky, it was the incubator for their new lives. If not, it would be their tomb.

And so, they waited.

Piper was asleep when the door opened the next time. Ian touched her cheek and murmured, "Wake up, baby. We've got company."

She sat up, blinking sleepily until she saw the white lab coat. This was it. The moment when they would find out if Ian lived or died. His fingers found hers in the faux mink margins of her sleeve and clutched her hand tightly. She squeezed back every bit as nervously.

"Good news, Agent McCloud. You are free of the virus. If you would like to leave this refrigerator and join the rest of the guests in the ballroom, you may feel free to do so. The CDC has decided to keep everyone in cool environments for seven days, just to be safe, but I'm confident you don't need this extreme cold any longer."

"How many victims have there been?" she asked soberly.

The doctor waxed serious. "We've had fifteen fatalities so far. Sadly, I estimate another thirty or so patients will succumb. The good news is that, after last year's Ebola scare, we've got enough trained health care workers and portable isolation units to contain this outbreak. Had the virus not been vulnerable to ionized silver, and had we not discovered that fact so quickly, the fatalities could have been much, much worse."

Piper flung herself into Ian's embrace. Even through their thick coats, he squeezed the stuffing out of her with the strength and relief of his embrace. She said a silent prayer of thanks that Yusef Abahdi had loved his daughter enough to build in a way to protect her, and unwittingly, to save them all.

"Ready to get out of here?" Ian murmured.

"Absolutely," she answered fervently.

The hotel's security man stood behind the doctor in the doorway. "That thing you asked about, Agent McCloud?"

Ian looked up sharply.

"Taken care of. I think you'll find everything to your satisfaction."

Ian busted out in a gigantic, ear-to-ear smile.

"What?" Piper asked quickly. She knew better than to trust any man who wore that shit-eating grin.

“C’m on. It’ll be easier to show you.” He shed his coat and held out his hand.

She doffed her coat as well. As nice as the fake fur coat had been, a day-and-a-half of wearing it made her glad to get rid of the thing.

She laid her hand in Ian’s. Wherever he wanted to lead her, she would follow. They’d been to Hell, and he’d managed to bring her back safe and sound.

Piper followed Ian out of the refrigerator, and she jolted when loud applause erupted. A good chunk of the hotel’s staff lined the long aisle between the stainless steel prep tables, and they were all smiling and clapping. As Ian led her through the phalanx of people, many offered their thanks for what she and Ian had been through to save them.

“What are they talking about?” she asked Ian under her breath.

“No idea,” he muttered back.

The doctor glanced over his shoulder at them. “Your story’s been all over the news. The heroes who nearly died to bring word of how to stop the virus to the people of Las Vegas, and to everyone else beyond the city who was exposed. And then, the two of you having to hole up in a meat locker in a last ditch effort to save Mr. McCloud’s life—it made for good sound bites, I have to say.”

“Oh, dear. If we’re seen on TV we won’t be able to do undercover work—“ she started.

“It’s okay, Piper. I have something else in mind for us to do next.”

Her gaze snapped to his face. “What’s that?” But his expression gave away nothing.

They followed the security chief through the bowels of the hotel, destination unknown. But then the procession stopped in front of a pair of swinging double doors. Oddly, the security man turned to smile at her. “Ready?”

“For what?” she asked blankly.

Ian tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and nodded at the guy. A couple of waiters swung the doors open and Ian escorted her forward.

They took a single step into the giant ballroom and she stopped dead in her tracks. A deafening chorus of cheers and applause broke out from the hundreds of hotel guests and staff crammed in the room, but that wasn’t what froze her feet to the floor.

A long, white floor runner stretched away in front of her and Ian, leading up to a raised dais with an elaborate wrought iron bower covered in ivy and white roses. Underneath it, a man who was the *spitting image* of Elvis Presley stood there wearing...

...were those preacher’s robes? He held a bible open in his hands, too, and the guy was grinning as foolishly as everyone else seemed to be doing all of a sudden.

The cheers quieted, and music broke out. Holy crap, that was an orchestra over there in the corner. And they were playing the Wedding March.

Whoa. *What?*

She looked over at Ian in panic. The moment her gaze lit on him, he dropped to one knee. Her jaw dropped in response. The security guy reached out and handed Ian a little velvet box.

“Piper Roth. You had me at the first moment you spotted me in your gun sight. I feel like I’ve loved you enough for ten lifetimes already, and God knows, we’ve done enough living for ten lifetimes. Would you make me the happiest man alive and agree to marry me and do absolutely nothing together for the rest of our lives?”

She gazed into his beautiful, hopeful eyes that reflected the giant heart inside the man, and everything they’d been through, every struggle they’d gone through, every hardship they’d endured to arrive at this moment fell away. The people and the music and flowers. All of it disappeared, leaving only the two of them.

Together. Alive. In love.

She answered into the deep hush, “I will marry you, Ian McCloud, however I will not promise to do nothing. I have plans for you, good sir.” A mischievous spark entered her eyes, and answering heat leapt in his.

He held up the box to her. “Let’s see what the hotel manager picked out from the house jewelry store for you.”

She opened the box and gasped. A gigantic diamond engagement ring surrounded by a ring of smaller stones was nestled in the black velvet interior. The thing must be worth a *fortune*.

Ian plucked it out of its box and slipped it on her finger. It was cold and heavy. But it reminded her of Ian. He’d emerged from their enforced cold more solid and whole than ever.

“What do you say, Piper? Wanna get married in Vegas?”

A huge smile spread across her face and took over her entire being. “I’m up for it if you are.”

He laughed richly. “I never could turn down a dare from you. Let’s do this.”

The security guy cued the orchestra who took up the wedding march again. She looped her arm around Ian’s elbow, and they walked forward together. Into whatever the future might hold, secure in the knowledge that no matter what life threw at them, they had each other and their love to see them through.

And best of all, they’d be able to tell their grandkids they got married by Elvis in Vegas.

Thanks so much for reading Ian and Piper’s story! If you want more thrilling stories of love on the edge of danger, let me know whose story you’d like next at www.cindydees.com. Do you want to meet Alex’s brothers or more of the McCloud men?

If you want up to the minute book news, bonus content, sales, and giveaways from me, you can join my [NEWSLETTER](#). I send out an update about once a month and will never share your contact info.

In the meantime, the first book in my thrilling, romantic action-adventure Medusa series, THE MEDUSA PROJECT, is [free HERE](#). And to tempt you to give it a try, here’s an excerpt...

August 6, 8:00 a.m.

Free-fire zone Alpha

Air Force Major Vanessa Blake ducked and spun, plastering her back against the muddy wall of her foxhole, narrowly avoiding a barrage of incoming fire. Enemy infantry had their position surrounded on three sides, and the only reason it wasn’t all four sides was the river at their backs. Correction. The water moccasin-, alligator-infested river at their backs.

“Ammo check!” she called.

“Low!”

“Low!”

“Out!”

“Low!”

“Five minutes’ worth!”

“Somebody get over to Echo position and pass that ammo around. We’re not gonna last two more minutes at this rate!” she ordered tersely. Crud. They were in a heap of trouble. She had only sixteen guys left standing out of fifty, and the enemy had close to forty. She had to do something radical, here. Something unexpected. Think, Vanessa! The woods around them had plenty of cover for enemy shooters, and that’s why they were getting slaughtered like trapped rats in this foxhole complex. She had to turn the tables. Make the woods work against the advancing forces. She glanced up at the trees overhead. Big, mature oaks, mostly. Sturdy. Strong enough to climb...

“Guys,” she called out low, “I’ve got an idea. Huddle.” The enemy was close enough to hear her plan if she shouted it to the far end of the bunker.

“We’re going to crawl out of here and climb the trees around this position. Then we’ll let the enemy advance to the foxholes and pick them off from above. Set your weapons for single shots. We don’t have enough ammo left to spray their lines with automatic fire. Use sticks and leaves to camouflage yourselves. Get up high in the branches, and when I give the signal, start firing down through the leaves. Think snipers, here. No wild shots. Wait till your targets are close enough to guarantee a hit. Take your time. Aim carefully. Keep your wits about you. Got it?”

The glum faces around her lit up with hope. They were all likely to die messy deaths before this day was out, but by God, they’d go out fighting if she had anything to say about it.

“We’re gonna have to move fast. We’ll split up and crawl out each end of the bunker. Stay behind cover as much as you can, but keep moving. We’ve only got a couple minutes to get into position. Let’s do it,” she said forcefully. She turned and led half the men in a crouching run to one end of the linked foxholes.

She slithered on her belly out of the red clay muck of the foxhole, her bulky rifle cradled awkwardly across her elbows. Belly crawling with a fast twisting motion of her torso, like the alligators that inhabited the area, she passed up a couple trees with nice, low branches for climbing. Better leave those to the guys with less physical strength than her. One by one, she dropped off her troops in an arc around the enemy’s right flank. And then she was alone. Staying low, she tossed a length of nylon rope around the girth of a giant oak tree. Using the rope as a climbing harness, she shimmied up the tree as slick as any lumberjack.

She worked her way a good thirty feet up the tree and turned to survey the situation. Perfect. Clear line of sight down the brown-shirted line of enemy soldiers. She chambered a round in her rifle and took aim carefully. And fired.

A satisfying red circle blossomed in the middle of the chest of one of the enemy soldiers. One down. Shots began to rain down from all directions, and in a matter of seconds, half the enemy line was out.

“Fall back!” the enemy commander screamed. Chaos ensued as his forces attempted to obey in the midst of the death raining from above.

“Everybody down!” Vanessa shouted. “Charge!”

She shimmied out of the tree and joined up with her troops. They took off in hot pursuit, picking off stragglers as the skirmish turned into a lopsided rout.

August 6, 8:15 a.m.

Free-fire zone Alpha

“Jeez Louise. What a mess,” Lieutenant Colonel Jack Scatalone announced in disgust from the fat edge of the battlefield as he watched the tide of the mock battle turn abruptly. He put down the field glasses and held out his hand. “Give me one of those toy guns.”

“Are you sure, sir? Your uniform...”

“It can be cleaned,” he snapped. “Or replaced. How do you fire this damn thing? Is it loaded?” He inspected the oval canister attached to the top of the half-scale rifle that somebody had thrust into his hands.

“It’s full, sir,” his host stammered. “Two hundred half-inch paint pellets. It’s really an honor to have you show us a couple moves.” The eager kid quickly showed him how to pressurize and fire the paintball rifle.

He took off his wheel cap and stripped off his dark blue Class A jacket, with its multiple Special Forces badges and Christmas tree of ribbons. He passed them to a pair of waiting hands along with his crisply starched, light blue shirt and tie. He squatted, scooped up handfuls of red mud and streaked his face with the stuff. A little in his hair, and great stripes of it across his white T-shirt, and then he was off and running, low and fast. He circled wide of the current action, closing in silently from the left rear.

Rather than fire his weapon and give away his position with the popping sound of the air rifle, he stepped up behind his targets, pressed the rifle barrel into their ribs and murmured low in their ears, “Bang. You’re dead, buddy.”

He took out most of the right end of the line before Major Blake realized her troops were disappearing like magic. Jack heard her call for her remaining men to pull in tight in a close fighting formation.

Thank you, Major. Now her men were all nicely clumped for him to wipe out all at once. He moved in for the easy kill.

The eight remaining men had taken cover behind a huge, fallen log. He was going to have to circle around it and come in from the other side. But the poor bastards would be ducks in a shooting gallery. This wasn’t even going to be a challenge. He eased forward, at one with the woods around him. One foot in front of another in complete silence, he glided forward. He hadn’t been in the Special Forces for fourteen years for nothing.

Down a hill streaked with runoff gullies to that little stand of brush at the bottom. It would provide perfect camouflage for the shot. Dead leaves lay in an ankle-deep carpet in this part of the woods, and he eased each foot down separately to minimize the rustling noise of his passing. He crouched and braced the barrel of the toy rifle against a sapling. Peering through the leaves, he caught sight of the cluster of scared-looking soldiers. Bingo. He took aim and began to squeeze the trigger.

And jolted violently as an apparition in brown rose out of the flat ground beside him. Something hit him hard in the chest, stinging sharply. He looked down in disbelief at the circular splatter of red paint on his chest. Then looked up at the broad, white grin showing out of a face completely covered in mud and crushed leaves.

“Gotcha,” the woman declared triumphantly.

Sonofabitch. She must have laid down in one of those runoff gullies and covered herself in leaves. And she’d done it so carefully he hadn’t noticed the disturbance to the ground cover. He scowled narrowly. Okay, so Vanessa Blake was good in a game of paintball. Big deal. But that didn’t mean she’d be worth a damn under live-fire conditions.

“Major Blake, I presume?” he said coldly.

Leisurely, she brushed leaves off herself. Not that it did a bit of good. She was caked from head to foot in red mud. Only after she’d made him wait a few seconds did she ask coolly, “Who wants to know?”

“I do,” he bit out. “Lieutenant Colonel Jack Scatalone.” Normally, he’d expect a salute from a lower-ranking officer, but they weren’t in uniform, and she’d just killed him. Damnit.

“What brings you out here today?” She glanced down at his ruined navy blue uniform slacks. “You’re not exactly dressed for this kind of fun.”

“I was sent to fetch you.” The words tasted sour in his mouth. He did not appreciate being the errand boy for anyone, even if his new boss was a four-star general.

One graceful eyebrow arched under the mud. “By whom?”

“If you’re done playing toy soldier, come with me. I’ll tell you more on the way.”

He held a hand down to her and she grasped it firmly. His first impression was of surprising strength. Their gazes met, and suddenly their palms transformed into pressure plates with electricity zinging back and forth between them. Abrupt, intense awareness of her slim curves as he hauled her to her feet made his gaze narrow in irritation. He was not here to get a boner for this woman. And yet, that very thing was happening.

He spun away from her and commencing marching back toward the clubhouse.

“Do I have time for a shower?” she asked as she tromped out of the woods beside him.

It gave him a perverse sense of satisfaction to think about dragging her through the pristine halls of the Pentagon looking like a pig in swill. “No,” he snapped. In fact, they probably did have the time, but he’d cooled his jets long enough playing toy soldier this morning in search of her.

His foul mood didn’t improve one bit when he and the major emerged from the woods. A rousing cheer went up, and a hundred weekend warriors grinned like idiots at the big, fat splotch of red on his chest.

Bested by a woman. Double damn.

The good news was that he was going to get all kinds of opportunities to get even with her. The hot major just didn't know it yet. But she would soon.

August 6, 10 a.m.

northern North Carolina

Vanessa studied the man driving the civilian car in hostile silence beside her. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark tan. Severe features. Hard. His profile could've been chiseled from rock. So could his personality. He hadn't said two words since they'd left the paintball range an hour ago.

So much for him telling her more about this mystery summons en route to wherever they were going. She'd met his kind before. Macho jerks who couldn't stand the idea of women infiltrating their precious military. She shrugged mentally. His kind were a dying breed. Women were here to stay and he could just get used to it.

If nothing else, he had a killer handshake, complete with more sex appeal than ought to be legal in one man. Thankfully, she'd been around the block enough times to know that men like him were all sizzling attraction and no actual substance when it came to relationships.

She might have been a Spec Ops groupie as a young lieutenant, but she'd long ago learned that men like Jack Scatalone were emotionally suppressed jerks who shut down all semblance of human feelings so they could do their jobs without falling apart. She was glad for their service to their country, but she bloody well didn't want to date the type.

She was surprised when the car turned into what looked like a private driveway. A brick mansion came into view, and he drove around to the back side of the spread. She spotted a hefty helicopter on the back lawn, black, ugly and powerful-looking. What the hell was a Blackhawk doing here in civilian-landia? They were highly specialized spec ops aircraft.

"Why's the Blackhawk here?" she ventured to ask.

"It's our ride."

Whoa. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to fetch her in the middle of her vacation—her once-every-five-years, the-Air-Force-made-her-take-it vacation. Of course, she doubted her boss had high-stress mock combat in mind when he shoved leave orders at her and told her to relax.

She grinned to herself. Paintball was relaxing. Or, it had been until the prickly colonel showed up.

Why on earth did someone want her back at her desk bad enough to send a freaking Blackhawk after her? She was a mid-level paper pusher who handled nothing of importance.

She waited silently while Scatalone tossed the car keys to a gray-haired man standing by the helipad. The guy looked retired military and nodded tersely as they approached. Scatalone motioned her into the 'copter.

She strapped herself into a no-frills, nylon-webbing seat across from the colonel. Their knees didn't quite touch, but they might as well have. Heat rolled off her escort, and yet again, she was confronted with the massive sex appeal the man wore like a second skin.

When the chopper was well under way, he unbuckled his shoulder harnesses and stripped off his muddy undershirt.

Oh. My. God. The man had the kind of hard, muscular torso a male cover model would make a fortune with. A fine sheen of sweat actually broke out on her forehead as she fought back an urge to lean forward and touch all those acres of male perfection.

Was he even aware of the effect he had on her?

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and the faintest smirk curved his mouth. Bastard. He knew exactly what he was doing to her.

Thankfully, he reached for his uniform shirt and shrugged into it. Still. Her gaze was unwillingly glued to his big, tanned fingers as they slipped each button into his hole.

The helicopter dropped sickeningly as it hit a pocket of turbulence, and her stomach rumbled ominously. She swallowed hard and prayed that the secret nemesis of her career—persistent airsickness—wouldn't reveal itself. Although the grumpy colonel's black patent leather shoes were caked in mud and looked liked hell, she didn't want to barf all over them.

How she managed to hang on to her breakfast through the interminable chopper ride she had no idea. It was probably just as well that she was filthy and caked in mud and leaves. Nobody could see the sickly green color her skin had to be.

She'd just about decided to let rip with the contents of her stomach when the distinctive skyline of Washington, D.C., came into view outside her window.

Whoa. Who wanted to talk to her so urgently here? And about what?

She currently supervised a small team of computer programmers working on updating the database for a supply squadron in North Carolina. It was a beta test of a larger overhaul of the supply and logistics programs the Air Force currently used. And it was a totally dead end job.

The powers-that-be had stuck her in the position to shut her up, of course. To get her off everyone's case about the idea of letting her apply to the Special Forces. Sure, a few women had made it into the Army Rangers. But she wanted to go full-on

spec ops. Delta Force. SEALs. Marine Recon.

Not that her efforts had done a lick of good. Her dream wasn't to be.

The helicopter swooped down low enough for her to make out individual ripples in the Potomac River, and then rushed north, swinging up aggressively for a landing on top of the gray roof of the Pentagon. Damned show-off pilots.

Almost back to terra firma.

Don't barf.

Do not barf.

The colonel was true to his word and gave her no opportunity whatsoever to clean herself up, refusing even her request for a restroom stop inside the Pentagon's plush heliport arrival lounge.

Clearly he was hoping to intimidate her. Throw her off balance.

But he didn't know her well enough to realize she got a kick out of strolling down the high-gloss corridors of the Pentagon looking like the creature from the Black Lagoon. The looks all the scurrying flunkies threw at her in the halls were priceless.

She was grandly amused by the time the lieutenant colonel turned into a rich, walnut-paneled corridor. Holy cow. The offices of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Well, okay then. That was a little intimidating. But damned if she'd let Jack Scatalone know it.

They stepped into a sitting area furnished like some old-world gentlemen's club with leather couches and thick rugs. Despite its soothing décor, the atmosphere in the office was electric. Like this place was the center of something important. Like life and death decisions were made here. Her adrenaline surged. God, she loved being where the action was.

Okay, so now she felt a little weird in her camo fatigues and full-body mud wrap. When they'd landed, Jack had shrugged into his Class A jacket, tied his tie, and brushed the dried mud off his pants and shoes. In stark contrast to her, he looked reasonably presentable. To cover her discomfort, she occupied herself with picking bits of oak leaves off her clothes and tossing them into a trash can.

A severe, gray-haired secretary stepped out of an interior office and looked down her narrow nose with distaste at Vanessa. "General Wittenauer will see you now."

Wittenauer? The JSOC commander? The Joint Special Operations Command itself? Headquarters and operational command center for all inter-service special operations units and missions. Except it was based out of North Carolina, not the Pentagon. Was Wittenauer doing something else now that she hadn't heard about?

Her pulse leaped in sudden anticipation. She'd applied to various Special Forces schools every year for the first ten years of her career, knowing full well that women were not accepted to those elite units. But a girl could always hope. Maybe that's why she'd been summoned to JSOC's Washington branch office....

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of 120 books, Cindy Dees has sold over two million books worldwide. She writes in a variety of genres, including thrillers, military adventure, romantic suspense, romance, fantasy, and alternate history. Cindy is also the creator and executive producer of an upcoming Netflix television series based on her Helen Warwick thriller novel series about a woman assassin.

2-time RITA winner, five-time RITA finalist, and 2-time Holt Medallion winner, she’s also a 2-time winner of Romantic Times’ Romantic Suspense of the Year Award and a Career Lifetime Achievement Award nominee from Romantic Times.

A former U.S. Air Force pilot and part-time spy, she draws upon real-life experience to fuel her stories of life and love on the edge of danger. Her social media links are at www.cindydees.com and www.cynthiadees.com



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