



Let a terrorist take her? Not over his dead body and damned soul...

Silent Warrior, Book 1

One thing makes Jack Hunter invaluable to his Delta Force Team. The same trait that makes him suck at relationships. Single-minded focus on his career—and honing his ability to never miss a kill.

After a terrorist missile devastates his team and leaves him with only partial memory of a FUBARed rescue mission, he retains only one clear picture no one believes: the last face in his gunsight belonged to a prestigious American businessman. The man's wife has to know something, but the only way to get to her is go AWOL.

After her husband trades his family to tango with double-Ds, Lauren Collins decides her dogs are better judges of character. She's unaware how far her soon-to-be-ex's web of deceit reaches—until the only thing between her, her sons and a killer is a wounded Delta soldier who activates her sorely neglected X-chromosome like nobody's business.

Their instant attraction is kryptonite to Jack's injury-dulled edge. Thrust into a world of peril, political treachery and treason, Lauren has no choice but to trust Jack with her life. Even if she and her sons survive, she's not sure her heart will...

Warning: Contains a warrior who doesn't hesitate to lay his body on the line, more than one emotional love story to tug at your heart, and chaos at Chuck E. Cheese.

eBooks are *not* transferable.
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Collateral Damage
Copyright © 2010 by Jenni L. Grizzle
ISBN: 978-1-60928-264-6
Edited by Tera Kleinfelter
Cover by Scott Carpenter

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: December 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

Collateral Damage

J.L. Saint

Dedication

This series is dedicated to all of the Silent Warriors protecting Freedom in the field, at home, and in the hearts of men and women around the world.

Thank you.

The Price of Freedom is Eternal Vigilance—

***Thomas Jefferson*

Chapter One

Present Day

Washington, D.C.

2000 hours (local), August 4th

Shorter of breath and one day closer to death...

Pink Floyd's "Time" hammered through Sergeant First Class Jack Hunter's brain as he tightened his grip on the treadmill and ran harder, his heart pounding, his lungs burning. Rage tinged with fear made for a potent Power Bar that fueled his drive. Sweat poured from his brow and his body screamed for relief, but he couldn't stop. Not yet.

His vision dimmed, and President Anderson's address on the overhead TV calling for a swift but rational retaliation to al-Qaeda's latest attack became nothing but a blur in his mind.

Life often hinged on the details, those seemingly insignificant microscopic events that most people trampled over obliviously. He'd trained to notice the details and to remember them. Yet no matter how hard he tried, his memory of the mission in Lebanon remained a kaleidoscope of combat images and one man's mocking blue eyes.

Rescuing the kidnapped daughters of Israeli Prime Minister Shalev and U.S. Ambassador James from a radical Islamic group two weeks ago had been a crucial move to stop the pandemic of political chaos circling the globe. It might have worked—had everything gone right. But it hadn't, and now the world was spiraling faster and faster to hell. He and Rico had been seriously injured. James's daughter, a gold medal gymnast, might never walk again. Shalev's daughter, a beautiful and dynamic singer, might never wake from her coma. Pecos was blind, and Neil was...

Jack clenched his teeth against the rising pain inside him. He took being team leader to heart both on and off the battlefield. The mission and his men were his responsibility. Rico, Pecos and Neil were his Delta brothers, and it killed him that he could only remember bits and pieces of what happened.

They're here, DT. They're alive! Will Taylor's—aka Pecos—distorted voice echoed in Jack's mind, sucking him down a long tunnel of fragmented memories. The team called him DT for "double tap" because Jack was damn good at headshots. Pecos's moniker came from the tall tales he spun about Delta team members and missions every time he downed a beer. The most legendary yarn was about Neil "the Sandman" Dalton. Pecos claimed that Neil, while saving a wounded soldier, had put thirty Taliban insurgents permanently to sleep in Afghan's Helmand Desert then disappeared in a whirlwind of dust. The

actual number of men killed was unknown for Neil's recollection afterwards had been, "the militants kept coming and I kept shooting until I ran out of ammo, then I prayed." Neil had called the sandstorm that had arisen then a miracle. It had provided him with cover to reach the nearby Helmand River. Once there, he'd floated the remaining miles to safety, dragging the soldier with him. The story had spread and grown to the point that even the terrorists whispered it amongst themselves, and reportedly refused to go near the place the Sandman had conquered.

But Neil would never again walk through the door and give Jack shit about screwing up his personal life. And Jack would never again be able to slap Neil on the back and razz his ass for spending a fortune on pimping his muscle car to the max.

They're here, DT. They're alive! was the last thing Jack remembered Pecos saying on the mission. With those words echoing in his mind, he closed his eyes and chased after the memory. He ran harder and harder, his head throbbing as he battled to separate truth from nightmare.

He remembered everything going FUBAR in an eye blink.

They're here, DT. They're alive!

Jack looked across the smoke-filled room toward Pecos. Sweat, fear and the growing heat of the fire eating the floor beneath them were suffocating. Nausea churned in his gut and he gripped his MP5 tighter.

"See if they're wired," he yelled to Pecos, his instincts screaming *danger* at him as he scanned the room they'd just invaded. Two terrorists lay dead at his feet. It would have been just like the sick sonsofbitches to booby trap the hostages and blow the fucking world up at the moment of seeming victory.

Down the hall, the Sandman's gunfire holding back militants from coming up the stairs kept a steady pace. Rico had taken a hit; his right arm hung useless and dripping blood. He'd slung back his machine gun, armed his left hand with his M9 Beretta and kept moving.

Behind Rico, the door of an armoire seemingly opened a fraction wider.

"Get down!" Diving, Jack shoved Rico aside as gunfire erupted from the slit, catching Jack in the leg. He twisted in mid air and let loose his MP5 in a spray of bullets that chewed and splintered wood in every direction.

A Caucasian, blond male in full business regalia fell from the armoire and face planted on the Persian carpet.

Jack kicked the AK-47 out of reach, flexi-cuffed the bastard then put his muzzle against the target's head before flipping him over.

"Well, fuck me and you," the man whispered, gasping and choking, his blue eyes full of mocking amusement. Coughing up blood, the man died with a smile. Then—

Suddenly Jack's head jerked back as his headphones were snatched off and Lt. Col. Roger Weston, his Delta Team commander, whom the teams called Commander Weston because anything less didn't fit his hard-edged charisma, got in his face. "Son of a bitch, DT. Are you trying to kill yourself?"

Damn. Jack had been on the verge of remembering what happened next. He couldn't stop. Not yet. Just a few more steps and he'd blow past this weakness in his mind and his body. Ignoring Weston, Jack kept running.

But the sterile-like surroundings and disinfectant smells of the physical therapy facilities at Walter Reed Medical Center and President Anderson's mug on the plasma TV didn't fade away again. The spell had been broken and the almost memory was gone.

Jack wanted to snarl and didn't hide his irritation.

Weston hit the switch, triggering the treadmill to wind to a halt. Gripping the handles tighter, Jack clenched his teeth again, sharpening the pain in his right temple. This was Weston's third visit since Jack woke up in ICU last week and the personal attention frayed at his nerves. Not that he didn't appreciate his commander's concern, he just wanted to be left alone to get back into shape and—

"In case you didn't hear me, I'll repeat the question. Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"You come all the way from Bragg to ask me that, sir?" Jack faced his commander once his vision cleared and he was steady enough to stand on his own.

"I'm not here as your superior, but as your friend." Weston's gaze was stark with some dark emotion, his mouth grim.

"Friend?" Jack stepped off the treadmill and mopped his drenched face. His head, back and leg hurt like sons of bitches from the blood pounding in his veins and it pissed him off. He wasn't even back to a quarter of what his pre-injury strength and stamina had been. "Then I'll lay it on the line with you. Stay away and let me deal with this my way."

"By running yourself until you're six-feet under?" Weston smacked the treadmill's frame with the flat of his hand. "You nearly lost an eye. You've fractured your skull and your back is cut all to hell. Oh and let's not forget the bullet wound to your leg. It's a miracle that you're even upright. Refusing to cooperate with everyone who is trying to help you, from rehab to psych, is making you worse."

"Hairline fracture only, which they steel-plated, and everything else is improving daily." He gave a disgusted snort. "As for trying to help me, I had fewer don'ts as a teenager in Southern Bible Camp than the crap here. It took an all out fight just to stand up to piss last week."

"Damn it. You know what I mean. You're not being reasonable."

"That psych therapist called you, didn't she?"

"You could have sat through the session. It's not just her, though. They've all called. Physical Therapy. The doctor. The nurses."

“And?” Jack shrugged. “We’ve both been down this road before. Group therapy and PTSD platitudes aren’t worth a crap. You and I both know the dreams just have to run their course. The sooner I’m back on my feet and out of here doing what I do, the sooner that will happen.”

The nurses had reported his nightmares, but the daytime flashbacks he’d been able to keep hidden. Some know-it-all shrink who didn’t have a clue to the shit he lived with, wouldn’t do anybody any good by rattling around in his head.

Weston narrowed his gaze. “Have you looked in the mirror, DT? You’re not white as a sheet. You’re grayer than death itself. You’re overdoing it. It’ll be months before we can even assess whether or not you can return to duty.”

Jack schooled his features into a blank stare. The fear that had been driving him wild, what he didn’t want to consider, had just been flung into his face and hung like a noose before his eyes.

Assess whether or not he could return to duty?

Fuck that. He was nowhere near ready to put his neck in the loop by even discussing the idea. He glared at Weston, determined to stand his ground.

“No, I haven’t looked in the mirror. I don’t care how the bastards rearranged my mug.” Jack nodded to the TV screen where President Anderson’s address to the nation had just ended and video from al-Qaeda’s attack on America’s oil hubs filled the screen. “This shit happened on our watch, sir, and I want back into the fight.”

Al-Qaeda’s latest move was their smartest yet. By crippling the US’s oil reserves and industry, they not only brought the country to an economic standstill but also divided it into factions. Crude oil rang in at two-fifty a barrel and was climbing higher. The tree huggers and libs shouted it was time to go green cold turkey and that gluttonous America was finally paying the price for their imperialistic agenda. The rest of the population was up in arms, wanting blood, and demanding that President Anderson act immediately.

The President and Weston were cousins with a remarkable resemblance to each other, even considering the twenty year age difference. Both men had intense eyes, square jaws and black hair. Their imposing six-three stature, sharp speaking skills and determination made a dynamic combination. Unfortunately, Jack didn’t think there was anything the President could say that would stop the inevitable. An eye for an eye wouldn’t satisfy the Americans. They wanted blood for oil and mass destruction for economic devastation. An all out global war marched closer by the minute.

“Get back into the fight?” Weston shook his head. “You’re not being reasonable, DT, and you know it.”

Jack closed his eyes and counted to five. He was being reasonable. It wasn’t his fault the world had gone off the deep end. “Do they know who took out Aziz yet?”

One of Islam’s top Imams, Hassan Omar Aziz had been killed by sniper fire within the hallowed borders of Iran. That one act had inflamed the Muslim world and fired extremists to new levels of hatred.

Evidence left behind fingered the Americans, as if they'd done the deed and then boldly said, "Fuck you. Here's proof. What can you do about it?"

Radical Muslims worldwide refused to see it was a set-up.

Weston shook his head. "No. Everything possible is being done. Every asset is searching and every snippet of intel for months is being scrutinized."

"What did Meir say?" Meir Goldman, one of Mossad's top agents, had worked with Delta on a number of operations and had become a personal friend of the team. He was a man who'd proved his salt and had once saved Jack's life. A man they could count on being honest with them when he could. Relations between Israel's Secret Service and the US had become strained after the assassination of Aziz as each looked to the other for the deed. Aziz had been very vocal in his hatred for America and in his demand that all Muslims were called to destroy Israel. Reclaiming of the Middle East from the infidels was Islam's only path to salvation.

"Meir had very little to say. He's offended that we left Mossad out of the intel on Shalev and the mission to rescue her." Weston paused then abruptly turned and paced away, hands fisted. "If only things in Lebanon had gone right."

A weaker man would have flinched from the intensity in Weston's voice. The tense emotion was totally out of character for the cool, by-the-book commander, and Jack studied him closely for the first time since waking up in the hospital. Something had set Weston off his game. Dark circles bagged his eyes and a seemingly brittle veneer had settled over his chiseled features.

Weston was the kind of man who'd never admit to a weakness, so Jack knew better than to ask what was eating his commander. He'd have to check with the other men to see what was going on. Not that the current world events weren't enough. Meir's reticence had to bite too. Weston and Meir had been involved in a harrowing mission a couple of years ago, one that neither of them spoke about. Still, Jack couldn't blame Meir for being ticked. If the shoe had been on the other foot, Jack would have been pissed too. But there hadn't been time to coordinate a joint operation to rescue Shalev and James's daughters when the actionable intel had come through.

If everything had gone right with the rescue, all of Israel would be singing the US's praises, but it hadn't. Now Meir and every other Mossad agent thought they could have made a difference if they'd been there. Hell, Jack had been there and even he felt the same way.

"You know, it's still not making sense to me." Jack rubbed the ache in his temple.

"What?"

"That the terrorists blew up the fucking world at the last moment. I clearly remember the second floor was on fire. We were on the third. They could have waited, and picked us off as we climbed out of the windows. The whole suicide scenario of them blowing up us and themselves doesn't mesh."

“With Beck’s team on the perimeter, maybe they didn’t think they had any other option. Who can ever really understand the suicide mindset?” Weston shrugged, dismissing the subject. “Listen and take a chill pill. Every agency with an acronym from A to Z has men on the job and you’re a long way away from getting back into the fray.”

Jack exhaled at the force of the frustration ripping at him. How could he just do nothing? “Have you found out anything about the blue-eyed blond son of a bitch who hid in the armoire?”

“We’ve been through this a dozen times. There’s no record of the guy. No blond men in the photos of dead. Nobody in rescue and recovery remembers seeing a blond man. Rico and Pecos don’t remember seeing him. Maybe you’re confusing him with someone else—”

“Rico doesn’t remember anything after the initial assault into the building. Pecos was in the other room, he never saw the blond. And no, I am not confusing anything. He was there and I killed him. I’d bet my life that not only was he American but Jihad wasn’t even a whisper in his mind. Something more than a Holy War might be behind the kidnappings.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I’ve run every available avenue into the ground.” Weston turned and raked his fingers through his longish hair. Delta didn’t follow regulations. “For now, just let it go, DT. Okay? Put the mission behind you and give yourself time to heal. Why don’t you take a vacation? You wanted to hit Montana last year and had to cancel for a mission. Why not go now?”

Jack closed his eyes and counted, making sure his response sounded damn reasonable. “Take a vacation? Neil’s dead, and I doubt his wife is holding her own. My best friend is on a on a major bender and won’t even talk to me, something that has never happened in all of the years that I’ve known Beck. Pecos is blind and struggling. Rico is in about the same shape as I am and chomping to get back on the team. These are my men. Not some Joe-Blows off the street. I can’t abandon them right now. And let’s not forget to mention the entire world is on the verge of war over al-Qaeda’s latest. Considering all of that, I can’t believe you’re telling me to go play tourist. To go take pictures of what? Yellowstone?”

“You’re in no shape for active duty and no amount of treadmill running will change that for a while,” Weston shot back. “So let the al-Qaeda shit go. There are plenty of us picking up the fight. I’m helping Mari since Neil died and I’ve been keeping tabs on Beck, Rico and Pecos while you were out of it. They can make do with me until you get some down time. Why don’t you tell Jill off and go see Livy. The daughter you were frantic for when you thought you were dying. The one you’re always saying you don’t see enough.”

Jack exhaled as if sucker punched. He didn’t remember the pleading for Livy part, but he didn’t doubt it was true. Livy was the only good thing about his seven-year marriage to Jill. But he’d only seen his daughter twice a year for the last four years thanks to Jill’s manipulations and move from Fayetteville to Asheville, North Carolina.

Everything regarding their joint custody was spelled out in their divorce agreement, which Jill completely ignored. Jack saw Livy only when it was convenient for Jill and that was on Father's Day and Christmas. Up until the divorce when Livy was six, Livy had been Jack's joy. Jill had used that to rip his heart out. The divorce had been bitter and things hadn't improved much since despite her remarriage.

He could have taken Jill to court and fought for his rights, but then he had no doubt Jill's animosity level and the poison she fed Livy about him and his career would only increase. Besides, things were better off the way they were. He really sucked at relationships and he never knew when and where he'd be called to duty.

The last time he'd seen Livy had been on Father's Day. She'd asked him why he was a killer. She'd bought into her mother's views, who only watched news that covered those protesting the US's involvement in the war on terror and those opposed to America's hands on the stabilization of several Middle Eastern countries instead of getting a balanced view by considering the other side of the issue. The growing threat to Western Civilization by radical ideology could not be ignored. It was not going to go away and it had to be met head on at full speed to stop the flood. Anything less would result in failure.

Weston continued, "Beck's having trouble dealing with what happened but he'll snap out of it. You can't help Rico or Pecos right now because you're in the same boat as they are. Until we know if there's permanent damage from your injuries all of you are going to have to chill. I've been to see Neil's wife several times, she's doing okay." He looked away as if bracing for a blow. "But there's something you need to know. She has something of Neil to hold on to. She's pregnant."

Jack's knotted insides wrangled tighter. Neil and Mari had been trying for kids since marrying a couple of years ago. "Damn. Life never fails to deliver, does it?"

"Yeah. So why the hell are you making it worse? You keep driving yourself like this and you won't be around to see the kid born or help us stop al-Qaeda's bandwagon. The doctors say you'll be well enough to leave the hospital shortly and do outpatient PT. We can arrange for that at the Medical Center in Asheville. Go see Livy and give yourself time to heal."

"I'll think about it," Jack said. But once he looked in the mirror after Weston left, he knew he wouldn't be seeing his daughter. He looked as rough as Weston had described. Livy already thought Jack was a monster and right now with the demons eating at him over the failed mission in Lebanon and the world's situation, his daughter's assessment wouldn't be too far from the truth.

Chapter Two

Buford, Georgia

“We must take this to the police.” Thomas Ettinger’s voice over the cell phone held a hint of panic to it. “Bill might be in real trouble. He’s not answering his cell and I get nothing but voice mail at his home. God, he could even be dead.”

Ya think? Conrad Gardner clenched his teeth, stifling his sarcastic retort as he restrained himself from throwing his cell phone in frustration. Instead, he stomped on the gas pedal—several times—but barely shot forward. With the sputtering AC on, his clunker was already at top speed.

It amazed him that Thomas even considered Bill might be alive. Posthumously would be the *only* way Conrad would reveal where he’d stashed five million.

Well, semi-revealed. According to the short and sweet letter that arrived less than two hours ago, Conrad had part of the puzzle.

Con,

You’re receiving this because something has gone seriously wrong. I won’t be making Forbes list but maybe my buds can. There’s a million each waiting for you guys for nailing the man in the yellow hat for his international crimes. Bring him down for me. Lauren holds the keys to the evidence and the formula. But in case that blows up in your faces, I’ve written a clue to each of you on where cash is hidden. Con, yours is first, then Thomas, Edward, Ray and Bob’s. Don’t fail me.

There once lived a king...

Bill

Conrad’s current dilemma was that Thomas didn’t want to have any part of what might be shady dealings and dirty money. The idiot wanted to turn everything over to the police.

Conrad wasn’t interested in nailing anyone, yellow hat or not, but he was damn well getting his hands on the money. And sometime this century would be nice. He’d been arguing with Thomas for over an hour now. The cities and exits skirting Georgia’s Interstate 85 had passed in a blur as Conrad had made record time from his South Carolina home off Lake Hartwell to Thomas’s Buford, Georgia estate north of Atlanta.

When it came to the law, Thomas was as narrow minded as a needle eye and as unyielding as his extra-starched Armani dress shirts. By keeping the prig on the phone, Conrad was assuring himself that the

man couldn't screw things up by singing his righteous song to the cops or any of their other so called friends. Last year in Vegas Bill, Edward, Ray and Bob had embarrassed the hell out of Conrad by making fun of him in front of a chick Conrad was well on his way to nailing. Friends didn't screw friends out of a great screw. They'd always razed him about shit, a joke here or there that Conrad always let pass with a laugh just to be "in" with the rich crowd. But this time had been different, and his ass still burned every time he thought about it. The others didn't deserve the money. They didn't need the money and it pissed him off that Bill had included them.

"I'll be there in a few minutes and we'll work it out," Conrad told Thomas, putting as much assurance as he could muster into his voice. "Bill entrusted us. If he'd wanted this information in police hands, he would have sent it to them."

"Which is exactly my point," Thomas replied. "Because he didn't means the money is not on the up and up. I hate saying this, but he may have stolen it from the man in the yellow hat. Two wrongs don't make a right. If that man is a criminal then let the police handle it."

"Hold on." Conrad avoided hitting a semi then sharply cut across the lanes to make the right exit. Conrad argued with Thomas another ten minutes as he ate up the roads. The more he thought about the unfairness of it all, the more pissed he became.

His ass should be living on a multi-million dollar estate like the rest of the guys instead of in a rundown double-wide. The moment Conrad had shown up at Clemson on a football scholarship years ago, he'd realized he was destined to be rich. And it all would have been his too, if he hadn't blown his knee in his junior year. His name and the Heisman had been buzzing in the same sentence and the scouts had him pegged for the top NFL teams.

Now he sold security systems and repaired boat engines while all his college buds lived the high life. Every time they made their annual trip to Vegas over the past twelve years, he'd heard the stories of their luxurious lives. They threw cash about like Mardi Gras beads while his credit card debt mounted into the thousands. This was his chance to change all of that and Thomas's self-righteous bullshit wasn't going to screw him out of it. And the more he thought about it, the more determined he became to keep all of the money for himself. He deserved it.

"Open the gate for me. I'm coming up the drive now."

Thomas agreed and hung up the phone.

When Conrad arrived, they knocked knuckles as usual and went to the back deck of the three story mansion for a beer. Thomas's wife had left him a few years back. Ran off with her tennis instructor and reamed Thomas for half of everything, but the man was still rich. It boggled Conrad's mind. Both the wealth Thomas must have and the fact that he'd let the bitch take any of it.

If it had been Conrad, he would have figured out a way to keep what was his no matter what. Far below the deck, Lake Lanier's green waters rippled with boats and jet skies. Tree tops swayed in the pine-

scented breeze and the late afternoon-evening sun bored holes in his head. His blood pressure rose with every word Thomas spoke until he thought he would explode as they argued more about Bill's letter and the waiting fortune.

Forty minutes and three beers later, Thomas had completely entrenched himself in doing the right thing. But before calling the police, Conrad had talked Thomas into calling the others—Ray, Edward and Bob—to get their opinion about it. The numerous calls were met by voice mail and completely dashed Conrad's hope of swaying Thomas to keep the cops out of it. The dirty-cop bastards would likely keep the money for themselves.

Head pounding, Conrad raged inside as the thought of five million escaping his grasp edged him closer toward desperation. He studied Thomas intently, wondering if the asshole was waiting for him to beg. Out of all of the men in their group, he'd always thought Thomas the most compassionate. The others often teased Thomas too, just not as often or as bad as they did Conrad.

"At least let me look at the letter Bill sent before we call the cops." Conrad wiped the sweat from his brow, his fist clenched with rage. "How do we know this isn't another one of Bill or the other guys' pranks? The shits are always making me or you the brunt of a joke."

Thomas's eyes widened as doubt hit and he pulled a folded letter from his back pocket. He went to hand the letter over, but then shook his head and jerked the note back. "No. This just goes too far for Bill or even the others. And if you read my part of the clue for the money then you'll take off and end up in trouble. Believe me, Con, I'm doing this for your good as well as my own."

"To hell with that. This is millions you're pissing away with your righteous dick." Conrad snatched the letter, moved back from Thomas, and held his friend at bay as he skimmed the letter. His six-two height made keeping it out of five-nine Thomas's reach doable. Still, Thomas kept jumping and yelling for the letter until he'd backed Conrad to the deck's rail. Conrad was in the middle of reading the clue for the hidden money when Thomas caught the bottom of the letter and ripped it.

Roaring in anger, Conrad lashed out and slammed his fist into Thomas's face then watched in disbelief as his friend pitched through the splintering rail to the rocky ground thirty feet below. Conrad quickly grabbed the rail post and regained his balance, keeping himself from the same fate. He had to take several deep breaths before he could look down. Thomas must have landed on his head because he lay unmoving with his neck at an odd angle. His eyes stared blankly up toward the sky as blood flowed from his nose and busted lip.

Conrad descended the steps in a surreal haze and found the torn part of Bill's letter lying on the ground.

After staring at Thomas's body for a long few minutes, Conrad realized the upside of the situation. He now had the clue and he didn't have to deal with Thomas's righteous shit ever again. The sense of relief flooding him was akin to escaping a death sentence. He finished reading the clue then tucked the pieces of

the letter away before he erased evidence of his presence. The clues on where Bill had hidden the money didn't make sense yet.

There once lived a king. He died on a throne.

Hopefully with a third letter, Conrad could piece the whole of it together.

Selling security systems to his best friends turned out to be worth something after all because he knew exactly how to erase his tracks at Thomas's and getting into Bill Collins's house tonight would be a breeze. It shouldn't be too hard to find the letter Bill sent to Lauren and once he did, Conrad would already be halfway to five million dollars and never have to put up with the others' shit ever again.

Chapter Three

Atlanta, Georgia

“Watch out, Matt!” Lauren Collins grabbed her son from the proximity of the pony’s hooves in a harried rush. Hank, the pony ride handler, was more focused on the moms than the kids. At what appeared to be twenty-something he was an Alan Jackson look alike with country written from his boots to his curled hat and milked that for everything it was worth. He treated every woman as if he were Mr. Irresistible who could satisfy their every want, making it obvious he was a cub looking for a rich cougar.

“Go, Mitch! Go faster and shoot the bad guys!” Squirming against her hold, Matt egged his brother on, his blue eyes as bright as Christmas stars. They were identical in looks except for tiny moles on their temple. Matt’s was on the left, Mitch’s was on the right. In everything else, they were different. One liked chocolate ice cream, the other vanilla. One liked the color blue, the other green. Mitch took things slow whereas Matt charged full steam ahead and wasn’t happy until he’d pushed everything to its limit—even his brother.

“Let me go help him, Mom. We’re soldiers like Uncle Jason, and we’re taking over the enemy camp. Please!”

Lauren braced against the pain in her heart and bit back the “Like Uncle Jason had been” that cut through her mind. A year ago, her brother had gone missing in action and her hope of him being found alive had dwindled with every passing day.

Matt wiggled harder. “Please, Mom?”

“Only if you promise to stay beside the horse and not get behind it again. It could kick you.”

“I promise,” he said. “It’s not a real horse, though. It’s a pony.”

She let Matt go. “Ponies know how to kick too.” But she spoke to empty space. He’d already taken off, wind ruffling his golden hair as he scrambled to dodge enemy fire.

“Giddy up! Shoot ‘em! Go!” Mitch yelled, practically standing in the saddle and jumping as he pointed his finger at an imaginary foe.

“Sit down, Mitch!” Lauren squinted against the low hanging sun. If she survived the last few minutes of the boys’ birthday party, she’d count it a miracle.

“You’re the one who needs to sit before you fall down.” Angie Freemont, best friend and official birthday bash photographer, joined Lauren. After snapping a couple of pictures of Mitch on the pony, she

grabbed Lauren's elbow and steered her to a nearby shaded chair then brushed her red curls back from her face and sighed. "Man, it's hot."

Lauren nodded. "You can say that again." The summer sun and humid heat were still powerful forces to be reckoned with despite the evening hour. She melted into a chair and picked up her sweet tea, brushing her forehead and cheeks with the icy glass before taking a long, cool drink. There were a number of things one could always count on having in the South, like grits and biscuits and gravy, but steamy weather and sweet tea were at the very top of the list.

Holding an outdoor birthday anytime between ten and four would have been scorching. So Lauren had gambled for a five o'clock party time, hoped it wouldn't thunderstorm, and won. Few trees shaded the expanse of rolling green grass that surrounded the Southern plantation-style home. She'd have preferred to keep the sprawling oaks and blooming dogwoods that had covered the lot when they'd bought it, but Bill had wanted an unhindered view of the world-class golf course. That was before he'd traded his family and eighteen classic holes to tango with Double-D's in and out of bed.

Don't go there, Lauren chastised herself. She should long be past the hurt of it all.

The remnants of honey barbeque scented the air and a rainbow of rented umbrellas dotted the luxurious lawn, each marking tables where neighborhood kids licked icing off cake and excitedly dug through their GI Joe goody bags they'd just gotten. All in all the party was a resounding success and she should relax. Would relax if Matt and Mitch would show just a little more caution. But that would be like stopping the ocean from rushing to the shore. Completely impossible. Just as impossible it would be for her not to worry about them.

"You look frazzled to a pulp."

Lauren tried to smile, but winced instead. "Am I that bad?"

"Worse. I was being kind. So what's up?"

Lauren had met Angie six years ago and they had quickly forged a bond that went deep. Angie had been Matt and Mitch's nurse in the Neonatal ICU at Northside Hospital and Lauren swore it was the woman's sharp instincts and devoted care that helped the boys survive those first desperate hours and days. Born at twenty-seven weeks with complications, hope for their survival had been dim. But Matt and Mitch had survived and were a miracle of life. Lauren didn't breathe without remembering and thanking God for that miracle.

"I'm fine." She deliberately ignored the root of her anxiety. Or roots she should say. Bill was only part of it. The other part involved restless nights, her worry for her children, and the feeling that she'd been hanging in limbo forever. Her divorce from Bill was taking a long time to finalize. But at the moment, a different dilemma with Bill had churned to the surface and had her strung tight.

Angie lifted her brow, disbelief in her sharp green gaze.

“Really, I’m fine.” Lauren spied Matt behind the pony again and nearly spilled her tea as she jumped up. Before she could shout, Hank scooped up Matt and plopped him on the pony with Mitch. She sat back down.

Angie took several pictures of the boys together then let the camera drop to her chest. Holding up three fingers, she eliminated them one by one as she spoke. “First, let me point out that the pony is only a little taller than the beasts you call dogs, which would likely make mince meat of the pony. Secondly, the pony is presently moving less than a mile per hour. The boys never move that slow, even in their sleep, so they’re actually being good. Thirdly, and most importantly, something besides the boys has you upset.”

Lauren sighed. “You’re right on all accounts.” Angie never missed a thing, which made her a great nurse and an excellent part-time photographer. The beasts she referred to were Sasha and Sam, White American Shepherds who guarded her sons with fervor.

When Bill had brought the puppies home on Matt and Mitch’s first birthday, Lauren thought her husband had lost his mind. She had twins with multiple health and developmental problems. She didn’t need to add two puppies to the mix, no matter how adorable they were. Matt and Mitch had squealed with delight at the puppies, but when the boys had begun rolling and then crawling across the floor to get to Sasha and Sam, Lauren had cried with joy. Bill had found the key to motivating their sons through their developmental difficulties. They wanted to go and do everything that Sasha and Sam did. It was something she kept reminding herself about after Bill changed.

She glanced at her watch. Eight o’clock. If Bill planned on showing up for their sons’ birthday party, he would have been here by now.

“You still haven’t heard from the toad, right?”

“Not a word.”

To Angie there were three kinds of men. Toads who were always toads—a prevalent breed. Prince Charmings who were always Prince Charmings—a rare breed. And Prince Charmings that turned into toads—a dangerous breed. Bill fit Angie’s dangerous category. He’d been Lauren’s Prince Charming until about two years ago. Lauren blamed it on his new job. When he became head of public relations for BioLogics—a company geared toward the promotion of save-the-earth green technology—he started keeping secrets for business, going places and seeing people he couldn’t tell her about. When she asked what about being an environmentalist had to be so top secret, Bill had become surly. Then his behavior worsened. Other women entered the picture. That had been Lauren’s last straw. They’d been separated for a year and a half, but the divorce wouldn’t be final until next month.

Lauren shook off her thoughts and explained to Angie what the problem was. “Bill said he’d be back for the boys’ birthday and they’re expecting him. I called his secretary earlier today and she hasn’t heard from him. Neither has anyone else. It’s been over two weeks since he left and he hasn’t called once. How can he disappoint them like this?”

Angie set her hand on Lauren's. "I wish I could wave a magic wand and fix it."

"Me too." Lauren focused her gaze on Matt and Mitch. They were laughing, their blond hair gleaming like spun gold, their smiles bright. If she didn't hear from Bill in the next hour, she would have to tell the boys that their father had a business problem and couldn't make it. Then they'd want to talk to him and they'd demand to know when he was coming back. He was their father and this was their birthday. She glanced at her watch and faced what she'd been avoiding all day. It was an hour later in Sao Paulo. Last month Bill had called the boys from there. The name Milania Carridas had shown on the caller ID that night.

Google revealed quite a bit about the Brazilian actress and her lush curves, right down to what amounted to a G-string and pasties on her Double-D's. To top it off, a video popped up of Milania with Bill at a high-end Brazilian resort doing the tango up close and personal on the dance floor that left no doubt they were doing the horizontal tango as well.

She resented this whole situation. Why should she hunt Bill down to remind him about his sons' birthday? He was an adult and he should have to bear the brunt of his mistakes. But it wasn't Bill who would hurt the most. It was Matt and Mitch. How could she not somehow make the effort to find out if Bill was there?

Yet the thought of calling made her ill.

"I'd castrate the toad too," Angie added.

"Hmm?" Lauren blinked at Angie, surfacing from her dilemma.

"The *toad*. While I'm waving my magic wand to fix things, I'll fix him too."

Lauren's half-laugh fizzled. "I'm mad enough to Bobbitt him and have been for a while. But being pissed off at Bill only makes things harder for the boys. I know they sense my anger, and I'm sure that's making them more insecure."

"Good. You be Ms. Responsible. Fortunately, I'm not under such constraints and can therefore express enough mad for both of us."

Lauren shook her head. "Then by all means castrate the toad, but we'll have to find him first." She groaned then. "Which means someone should call Brazil and see if he's there."

"Call Double-D G-string?" Angie winced. "Ouch."

"Yeah. Can you just shoot me now?"

Angie's smile turned devilish. "I've an idea. I'll call for you. I'll tell her that MetroSouthern is considering an article on jet-setting couples, and that I saw her picture with the toad. Even if he's not with her, she might have an idea of where he is. And you know she won't turn down US exposure."

Angie's mother was the editor for the hip mag that featured who's who in the new generation of business people and trendsetters in "Hotlanta".

"You'd do that?"

"In a heartbeat. While I am at it, I'll see if she can be bribed enough to strangle the toad with her G-string."

"Have I told you lately that I love you?"

Angie held up her hand. "Not so fast with the feel good. There's a catch."

Lauren didn't like the sound of this one. "What?"

"You must promise me that you'll come to the next MetroSouthern soiree with me. The guys are good looking, dynamic business men with plenty of money. The next step for you is a date where you engage in conversation with an interesting man, even if you aren't ready to jump into bed with him."

Each month the MetroSouthern magazine held a gathering for people featured in the current issue and Angie had been nagging her to go since Bill waltzed out the door.

Lauren nodded. "How can I even consider dipping a toe into the dating pool again when I was so wrong about Bill? MetroSouthern men sound as if they'd only be more of the same."

"Don't throw out the whole barrel because of one rotten apple."

"Yeah, well. I bit into that rotten apple, so you'll have to forgive me if I'm not interested in having apple pie any time soon. I won't attend the soiree, but I will promise to go out. How's that?"

Angie narrowed her eyes. "On a date?"

Lauren winced then nodded, her mind quickly zeroing on how she could get around going on a "real" date.

"With who?" Angie demanded. "It's only a deal if it is a *date* date. Not your cousin, a friend or that to-die-for gourmet cook pal from Faire Fureur. The only thing that lights his eyes up besides his masterpiece meals is a man."

She blushed, because that exactly what she had in mind.

"So who?" Angie asked.

"I don't know yet. Someone different. Someone who doesn't remind me of Bill."

Angie did the three finger thing again. "He must be hetero, single and between twenty-five and forty-five."

"You don't ask for much, do you?"

"Just wait. You haven't heard anything yet. Those are the qualifications for a *talking* date. The criteria for a *sex* date are a lot more vigorous, pun intended. But we'll worry about that one next month."

Sex date? She didn't do...she couldn't just do...she couldn't even think about...could she?

Her palms broke out in a sweat. Even though her restless nights stemmed from eighteen months of denying she was a woman didn't mean she was ready for anything to change that.

She obviously sucked at judging character in men. She'd not only erred once, but twice. The boyfriend before Bill had been a mistake too, a big one, which had made Bill so Prince Charming-like in her mind. Yet neither mistake should translate into never taking a chance on a relationship again, right?

That would be irrational. Just as irrational as her supposition that she could sustain herself on just being mom.

“Don’t look so serious.” Angie shook her head. “We’re talking in terms of casual not commitment.”

She didn’t do casual. Ever. Fortunately, a loud whoop saved her from having to reply, and she snapped her attention back to her sons. Hank lifted them off the pony, which meant that any second they’d be headed her way and Bill would surely be on their minds.

“Do we have a deal?” Angie pressed.

“This is blackmail, but yes.” Lauren smiled as the boys looked her way, their eyes shining. “It’s a deal. You’ll find her number on the desk calendar in my office. Top right hand side, written in red.” She’d find a way around Angie’s date plan.

“I’m on it.” Angie slid back her chair, taking off just as the boys reached the table.

“That was the bestest ride ever!” Mitch jumped up and down with excitement. “Did you see me, Mom? I rode like a real soldier.”

Lauren brushed back the hair from Mitch’s eyes. “Yes, I saw you. You rode like a pro.”

Mitch looked about the lawn and his smile fell flat. “Dad didn’t see, though. I wanted Dad to see the pony.”

“Yeah.” Matt’s brow furrowed in a deep frown. “Me too. Tell the pony man he can’t go until Dad comes.”

“I can’t do that, honey. The man must take the pony home so it can eat and rest.”

“But Dad *has to*!” they cried at the same time.

“Your father can see the pictures Aunt Angie took. You both know it wouldn’t be fair keeping the pony from resting after he’s worked so hard for you and your friends. I promise there are plenty of pictures to show your dad, even some of you two riding the pony together.”

Matt folded his arms across his chest in a symbol of manly independence. “I’m not going to sleep until Dad comes and sees the pictures. He promised he would.” Then he looked up, a sheen of tears in his eyes. “Why isn’t he here yet?”

“He’s never here anymore,” muttered Mitch, looking down as he kicked at the grass with the toe of his sneaker.

Lauren sighed. “I don’t know why he isn’t here. There could have been a plane delay. There could have been a business emergency. But I’ll make you a deal. You two can stay up as late as you want, only you must sit and watch a movie. No hide and seek with Sasha and Sam or War Zone.”

Both of their favorite games pretty much destroyed the house and led to hours of wild fun. After the party, Lauren wasn’t up for all of that tonight. Things had to settle down and get quiet. With luck they’d both be asleep before the movie ended.

“Just a little hide and seek?” asked Matt.

“Tomorrow. Not tonight. Now do we have a deal? Or do you two just want to go to bed at your usual time?”

“Deal!” they chimed.

“Then go say thank you and good night to all of your friends.”

The boys took off and Lauren leaned back in her chair. She’d only delayed and distracted them in regards to Bill, but the discussion had gone better than she expected. Signs that they resented their father’s absences were emerging, and if she wasn’t careful, their hurt could affect them for the rest of their lives.

Her parents had died in a car accident when she was sixteen. They’d been driving to pick her up from camp. And even though they had loved her, and they hadn’t left her on purpose, she’d still felt abandoned. That feeling sometimes reared an ugly head, especially since Bill walked out and her brother, Jason, had gone MIA.

Setting her thoughts aside, she pasted on a smile and joined Matt and Mitch for the thank-yous and good-byes. She’d picked the perfect day for her sons’ sixth birthday. There wasn’t a dark cloud in the sky, but plenty shadowed her heart.

Disaster struck after the last family left.

Sasha and Sam barreled out the back door as Angie exited. She heroically tried to keep them in, but was knocked aside as Sasha and Sam sprang straight for the pony, barking like hounds from hell. The pony jerked free from Hank then proved it could move like the wind and kick as it bucked like a Brahma bull through the open gate with her dogs on its heels.

Lauren yelled for Sasha and Sam as she took off running, but three people beat her into the front yard—Hank, Matt and Mitch. She gave up on the dogs, which by some miracle stayed out of range of the pony’s kicks, and started yelling for Matt and Mitch. Unfortunately, they were whooping so loud she didn’t think they could hear her. If they’d heard her and ignored her, then she’d ground them until their sixteenth birthdays.

Her worst fears took shape as Hank slipped in the grass and the boys ran past him. Twenty yards and the whole crew would hit the street, running like bats out of hell without a brain in their heads.

Oh, God.

Lauren yelled for the twins again. This time they looked back over their shoulders, saw her, and slowed slightly as they pointed at the pony and the dogs. From the fear in their faces, she knew they were saving their beloved pets from the now Godzilla-pony and wouldn’t likely stop until their mission was accomplished.

Suddenly the sprinkler system came on full force, shocking everyone with blasts of cold water—something that wasn’t scheduled to happen until four in the morning.

Matt and Mitch cried out in shock and came to a halt. Lauren could hardly see through the mist as she kept running, but as she neared the dark silhouettes of the twins, she found Sasha and Sam with them. The

boys' cry of surprise from the water blast had brought the Shepherds to them. She anchored a hand on each of their collars as Hank passed them, shouting for the pony named Clementine.

While she assessed his progress, worried that the pony would be hit by a car, the sprinklers cut off, bringing instant visibility. Hank had caught the reins, halting the pony about halfway into the street. Luckily no cars had been passing then.

Hank led the pony to the grass, faced her then stood staring at her. He looked shell-shocked, as if he'd been tossed from a Kansas-sized tornado. Water dripped from his hat and nose and plopped onto his drenched clothes that clung to a very fit body. Mud and grass had made their mark on his boots and she wondered if they were scarred for life. "Ma'am," he drawled.

"Welcome to Oz," she muttered.

"Is everyone all right?" Angie cried out as she splashed her way across the lawn and set a hand on Matt's and Mitch's shoulders. "I didn't know what else to do and the sprinkler valve was right there."

"You did well." Lauren tugged gently on the dogs' collars. Sasha and Sam dutifully sat. If the water hadn't surprised and slowed the runaways, the results could have been very, very bad.

"You might change your mind about that." Angie cleared her throat and looked pointedly downward twice. "Why don't you take the beasts and the boys inside and I'll help Hank?"

Lauren glanced down and nearly groaned aloud as a twinge of heat flushed through her. Her white sundress, white bra and white thong had become transparent, nipples to shadowed V. Hank was still staring, only he had more of a you-need-me-don't-you look to him than the lost-in-Oz look she'd first thought. You'd think she was on *Desperate Housewives* or something. And, oh God, maybe she was—as in, appeared as if she was desperate.

Surely the heat was embarrassment only and not remotely connected to the fact that a man, albeit eight to ten years her junior, had looked at her with real want. Want that had disappeared a long time ago from Bill's gaze and been replaced with impatience and disdain, unless of course he happened to be horny and she was conveniently near.

"Thanks." Lauren's voice caught in her throat, and came out as a strangled yelp. She gathered her courage, her entourage, and headed for the front door of her house. Her wet dress lay plastered to her backside and had to be just as see-through as the front.

While she appreciated Hank's appeal, she wasn't attracted to him. For her, even if everything else had been perfect, the age difference was a major killer. Yet a flood of feelings swamped her. She'd been so consumed with meeting Bill's expectations in a wife and nurturing her premature babies into thriving kids that she'd lost herself somewhere.

The boys started asking questions about their father again and she forced her disturbing emotions to a back burner. Trying to ease their growing hurt, she asked them to help her get Sasha and Sam inside. They each latched onto a collar with her and helped her coax the dogs toward the house.

Within ten feet of the front door, Matt and Mitch squealed with delight and took off running. She nearly lost her grip on the dogs as they leaped to follow the boys. Two bright red packages sat on the porch.

“Hold up,” Lauren shouted before the boys reached the boxes. “Let me see who sent them first.” Call her paranoid, but in today’s world, everything should be suspect.

She wrestled Sasha and Sam inside the house and then examined the labels. Her heart pounded a bit faster when she saw Bill had sent them from Brazil. One was for Matt and the other for Mitch. They each grabbed their present and hopped up and down with joy.

“He didn’t forget.” Mitch smiled.

“Told you so.” Matt nodded as if he knew everything in the world, which pressed Mitch’s I’m-as-good-as-you-are button, and they were off.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did.”

“I told YOU!”

“No, YOU didn’t!”

“Boys!” Too much sugar and too much excitement. “If you’re going to fight you might as well save the presents for tomorrow and go on to sleep tonight. Maybe you’ll enjoy them better in the morning.”

Matt and Mitch looked at her dumbfounded.

Before they could burst into tears or rebel, she smiled. “Ah, I don’t hear any more arguing. Good. Then maybe you aren’t too tired after all. So hurry up and change into dry pajamas and then you can open your presents and watch a movie. I’ll even make popcorn.”

They both nodded. She opened the door and they scrambled inside, immediately going for the stairs and their room. She hurried after them, knowing that she had about two-point-five seconds to get out of her wet clothes before the twins descended.

Make that less. She was naked in the bathroom when the thunder of their feet came down the hall.

“Wait on the bed. And no jumping,” she warned as she jerked on sweats.

She could hear the bed springs squeaking and Sasha and Sam barking. The dogs knew Matt and Mitch weren’t supposed to jump on the bed. She opened the door and the twins plopped onto their butts, hair still flying up and mischief in their eyes. They had their presents clutched in their arms and their pajamas turned about every wrong way possible. Matt had his Thomas the Tank Engine underwear on the outside of his pajama pants.

Shaking her head, she let it all go. “Okay. Open the boxes!”

From a shower of Styrofoam peanuts, two Dale Earnhardt, Jr. #88 green racing cars emerged. The boys squealed in excitement and took off racing down the hall, sounding like the Daytona 500. Barking up a storm, the dogs were fast on their heels. Peanuts lay in their wake and Angie was nearly bowled over as she appeared at the top of the stairs.

It wouldn't be a quiet evening after all.

Angie entered the bedroom and plopped down in the peanuts. "What was that? Greased lightning?"

"No, Dale Earnhardt, Jr. cars courtesy of Bill. He didn't show but he didn't forget after all."

"Interesting. I talked to Double-D G-string."

Lauren sat and blew at a peanut that had somehow landed in her hair. She already knew what she'd hear. Bill and the supermodel were slumming in a million dollar resort, surviving on caviar and champagne. Not that she cared anymore on her own account, but for the boys' sake she did. "Give it to me straight."

"She gave me all of her contact information and I promised to call her when we speak to Bill. He's a week late for their date."

Lauren snagged a red box and checked the postmark. It had been mailed from Sao Paulo, Brazil four days ago. "Maybe he's dumped her for a Samba dancer."

Chapter Four

Persian Gulf

Death stalked the darkest hours before dawn, when innocents blissfully slept and even the depraved lowered their guard for a moment's respite. Tonight was no different, except for the predators slipping like ghostly reapers across sandy ground, carrying a vicarious visitor among their ranks. The cameras embedded in ANVS-9 night vision goggles attached to the operatives' helmets gave Andreas Miles a clear, green-lit feed of the night and the movements of the black op teams on mission. His black op teams.

Leaning back, he lifted his Mollard baton, conducting each eerie pulse of Mozart's *Requiem Aeternam*. The D minor tones surrounded him in the silvery perfection of a Kondo amp and speakers as he watched his men move with surgical precision; the music perfectly matching his operatives' movements, a melding of action and sound that united his genius to that of Mozart.

Andreas's body tingled as he pointed his baton at one of the screens. Via the live feed, he saw his operative ready a black KA-BAR blade as his man crept silently to an unsuspecting guard. Andreas raised his left hand, palm up, building to a crescendo as his man sliced the guard's throat. Blood spewed, staining the sand before the man fell to the ground.

Andreas sighed with pleasure and glanced over at his son watching the show from his own bank of computers. They wore matching gold St. Jude medallions with the words "Pray for Us" emblazoned on them.

"Tonight we'll put OPEC's balls in a vise, eh, *mi perfecto hijo*." Andreas smiled at his faithful child. No one could ask for a better helper.

George nodded. The bright enthusiasm in his dark eyes let Andreas know that his son appreciated his brilliance. He'd originally named him Jorge, but his son had wanted it changed to match the name of his American hero. It fit so well for him that Andreas didn't mind.

Andreas tapped his baton on the computer screen as if calling an orchestra to attention. "Ever since I hit America's oil market, the radicals have been cheering, patting each other on the backs for a job well done. *Pero*, tonight they will sing a different tune," he told George, who was probably tired of hearing Andreas's weeklong rant. But the arrogance of the towel heads was as bad as that of the gluttonous gringos. They didn't have a clue who had attacked America's oil reserves and didn't have the balls to admit it. Instead, the Jihadist had been riding high on his dime for a week now. "How dare they claim victory for my genius, George. *Mierda*, can you believe it?"

George shook his head.

“They will learn their lesson tonight, *sí*? By dawn they’ll be lamenting in the streets and crying to Allah for Western blood as they face Mecca.”

George nodded.

Andreas glanced back at the screen, anticipating the thrill of bringing the world to its economic knees. There was no limit to the havoc he could wreak. He had the money to accomplish the impossible and with the hard-hitting power of his highly specialized Black ops teams—one good thing Bill Collins managed to do—he now had the resources. The clock was already ticking. Shortly, the heart of both Saudi’s Qatif and Qatar’s Dukhan oil production would suffer a major coronary thanks to the US military issue C-4 he’d stolen from Israel. Once detonated, the strategically placed explosives would kill the production of over a million BPD’s (barrels per day) of crude oil. That, combined with the destruction the al-Qaeda signature bombs he’d used to wipe out the Alaskan pipeline, US distribution hubs and SXL’s tank facilities last week, would topple the current power structure ruling the world. By the time he finished his plan and nailed the rest of the targets on his agenda, the ensuing political tit for tat battle between Western ideology and radical Muslim fanaticism would set the stage for Andreas’s ultimate goal, worldwide social and environmental justice—a masterpiece of political manipulation and world domination that would propel him to the ranks of Alexander the Great. He would be the one man to accomplish what all other revolutionaries had failed to do.

Madre de Dios, but he was a genius. Each blow he’d made had rocked the world beginning with the perfectly orchestrated assassination of Imam Aziz by two of his skilled operatives and a scoped-to-the max L115A3 sniper rifle. The evidence pointing hard fingers at the Allied West had been irrefutable. It was true the kidnapping of Prime Minister Nehemia Shalev’s and Ambassador Owen James’s daughters hadn’t gone as planned, but the results had played well into his hand despite Bill Collins’s idiocy. Bill never should have been on site. They both knew the US had the balls to act if information leaked, so it was his own fault that Delta had nailed him. Covering up Collins’s tracks had been a major nightmare, but Andreas had worked it out. He smiled and winked at his son. “*Pero*, St. Jude is still looking out for Andreas, eh, George?”

George smiled, a gaping, open mouth grin that warmed Andreas’s heart. His son would never personally know the pain and the horror of the streets, but he made sure George prayed to St. Jude daily. Beginning the day Andreas had been abandoned at eight, his every prayer had been answered by St. Jude. From a knife to kill the raping *bastardo* on top of him just before his tenth birthday to everything he needed now to be the one on top of everyone. By the time he finished, he would have accomplished in two months’ time what political activists and progressives had been trying to achieve for decades, if not centuries—every man and every nation around the world would be on equal footing.

Only once global social justice was in place would the environment have a prayer of surviving mankind. In an odd way, George had started it all for Andreas—new identity, new life and new purpose. It was through his love for George that he'd become an environmentalist, a passion that had led to his meeting the inventor, Enrique Santos and learned about the man's algae-based biofuel, GXP. Andreas had become fascinated enough to finance the scientist's experiments, coming to believe that Santos's focus on triglycerides and several unique and secret additives from the Amazon rainforest would revolutionize energy. Little did he know at the beginning that he would use it to gain power and revolutionize the world itself.

"Descanso de su alma a Dio. God rest his soul. You remember Santos, George?"

George let out a cry, the name still upsetting him even though years had passed. Santos had been a fellow genius, but had made a fatal mistake. He'd struck Andreas with his cane during an argument about the biofuel's development and George hadn't liked that. There'd only been pieces of Santos left. Andreas still relished George's primal show of savage protection as he tore the man limb from limb.

Mierda, but he wanted to be with the operatives tonight. He wanted to experience his genius first hand. Breathing in the sharp desert air. Running across the shifting sands. Slicing into flesh. He wanted to taste the grit, smell the acrid tang of blood, and feel the pumping power of adrenaline flooding his veins. But that would have chanced exposure and he couldn't afford that. Not now. Not when he was so close to gaining everything. Maybe it was that thrill that had drawn Bill Collins to the terrorist's stronghold. *Pero*, it didn't matter. All gringos were stupid anyway.

By dawn the eastern Arabian Peninsula would look like Armageddon had ensued. From MESAIEED's industrial complexes to Ras Tanura's refineries, the fires would rage and so would the hearts of all of radical Islamists. Perhaps even all of Islam would stand up and roar against this outrage.

Andreas would win this game because he knew winning took more than money and might. It took a ruthless disregard for anything that stood in the way. Except for harming George and his kind, no amount of collateral damage was too high. Many drug lords and most terrorists operated on this axiom. Most of the civilized world and especially the United States's brown-nosing politicians were clueless to this fact. Why else would they keep castrating its military?

Andreas had no restraints though. The world was now in the hands of a master and his symphonic melody would play until the last note. He was much more than a little boy lost on the streets now. He was a connoisseur of luxury, and, if you will, an audiophile and an environmentalist in their purest essence. All extraneous sounds should be eliminated from any symphonic experience and all unnecessary human life should be eradicated from the world.

Fewer people equaled less pollution. Many would die in getting him to the top of the world arena and many more would perish to make the world what it needed to be. That wasn't important though. It would be good for George and his kind and that's all that mattered.

A knock sounded at the door. George jumped up to answer it just as the operative on screen six slipped his knife to another guard's throat and Andreas missed the show as he glanced up at George's cry. Irritated, Andreas stabbed the button, killing the sounds of *Requiem*, his orchestrated moments of vicarious pleasure destroyed.

George didn't like Andreas's current assistant and Andreas wasn't sure he did either. It was his third Fidel in as many years, and the man was proving to be as dysfunctional as the others.

"¿*Qué carajo es?*" Whatever the fuck it was, it had better be good. George added an irritated screech as well.

Fidel gave George a nervous glance. Santos wasn't the only one George had had a problem with over the years. Andreas knew of the whispers among his staff. Murderous George is what they called his boy—a source of amusement that had Andreas contemplating buying and wearing a yellow hat and suit. George's favorite bedtime stories were about his hero, Curious George.

"*Señor*, Guru has cracked several of Collins's encrypted computer files." Fidel wiped his sweaty brow.

"It's about time, *sí?*" Bill Collins had already cost Andreas big time and it was unbelievable that two weeks post mortem the man continued to be a problem.

"One of them is *the* formula for the biofuel."

Andreas froze, sure Fidel misspoke. "Collins had files about GXP?" he asked slowly.

"No. He had the formula."

Andreas stared hard. Acid poured a burning path into his gut. The personalized Mollard baton in his hand snapped in two. George whimpered and rushed over, laying his head in Andreas's lap. Andreas brushed his boy's head, seeking to comfort.

This new development ruined his plans. He'd have to watch Armageddon from video rather than firsthand from the deck of the ECO-1—the largest of his fleet of watercrafts and what three hundred million could buy in five-hundred-and-seventy-plus feet of nautical luxury. Built by Blohm and Voss in Hamburg and delivered just last year, money and power couldn't buy better; armor plating, bullet proof glass, radar, laser shield, secret weapons—the works. ECO-1 could easily beat Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich's Eclipse in a pissing contest and had already dealt the Somali pirates a major blow. Pieces of the bastards were likely still washing ashore in Maakhir. But none of ECO-1 bells and whistles had protected him from an attack within. How had Collins obtained the formula for GXP? And what had the bastard done with it? Rage scraped down Andreas's back. Death had been too easy for Collins.

"I want Collins's body back from Brazil. I want his heart cut out and chopped into pieces. I want the rest of his remains desecrated and displayed to all the employees at BioLogics and at GreenWorld. ¿*Comprendes?* I want to know how he stole the formula. When he got it and what he did with it. No one betrays me."

“B-but the Brazilian authorities found Collins’s body a short time ago,” Fidel stuttered out.

Just yesterday Andreas had had Bill’s refrigerated corpse flown to Sao Paulo and dumped in a lake where greased palms would guarantee the autopsy results he wanted.

“Then get it back, *idiota*,” he whispered. He never raised his voice. Quiet control was so much more effective. But there were times that the stupidity of those around him sorely vexed his patience. In another life, he’d studied every move and mannerism of *The Godfather*, and had garnered just as magnificent and ruthless a reputation, only he’d always gone to the heart of the matter and cut it from his sobbing enemy’s chest.

“Then hire a reliable man in Atlanta to bring me Collins’s wife and kids for a little heart-to-heart discussion. George would like to meet them too. Get me answers, Fidel. *Ahora*. My patience is thin and George’s is even thinner.”

Fidel’s complexion turned green as he looked at the chimpanzee in Andreas’s lap. Everyone feared Murderous George, Andreas’s adopted son. As well they should.

Chapter Five

Atlanta, Georgia

0200 hours, August 5th

The jarring ring of the phone woke Lauren and sent her scrambling in the dark for the hand-held unit. The boys used the intercom as walkie-talkies and never left the phones in their bases, so it always ended up being a Marco Polo game to find one. Tonight it was under her antique slipper chair at her vanity. She found it in the record number of six rings.

“Hello,” she said as breathless as if she’d been dirty dancing between the sheets and not just dreaming about the much-missed deed.

“*Señora* Collins, pleeease.”

The Hispanic accent sent her pulse kicking. “I am Lauren Collins.”

“This is Eduardo Alvarez with the consulate in Sao Paulo. I must tell you of an unfortunate accident.”

Lauren closed her eyes and gripped the phone harder. “Bill’s been in an accident? How badly is he hurt?”

“Forgive me, *Señora*. I did not mean to confuse you with my words. The *polícia* found your husband’s body in the lake at Paradise Resort tonight.”

Lauren snapped her eyes open and sat in stunned silence for a moment. Then she shook the sleep from her mind. “What happened to Bill? How?”

“Forgive me again, *pero*, I do not have any more details at the moment. I will call back tomorrow once I know more from the *polícia* and about when we can arrange transportation home for his body after the investigation.”

“Investigation,” Lauren found herself stupidly repeating.

“*Sí*. I promise all will be done to find out what happened. *Buenos*, I will speak with you *mañana*?”

“Yes,” Lauren whispered. “Tomorrow.”

The blaring dial tone finally penetrated her stupor and she hung up the phone. She looked at the dark shadows surrounding her in the scarce moonlight, and suddenly all of the images she’d blocked out with her hurt came rushing through her mind. Bill’s empty clothes chest was still against the right wall. He never remembered which drawer held what and would always pull them all opened when getting dressed.

The family picture at the Georgia Aquarium still sat on top of the chest, but now faced the door rather than her bed. The boys often climbed in the chaise lounge next to it and shared stories about that day. It was amazing how much they remembered considering they were only four at the time.

The door to Bill's empty closet hung open because the boys had staged a Daytona 500 with their Dale Earnhardt, Jr. cars before bed last night. Her breath caught and her throat tightened as memories and feelings swamped her in a sad, painful wash. It was one thing to be mad at Bill when he was off jet setting and another to realize his life had been cut short, that he'd never walk through the door again and hold Matt and Mitch in his arms.

Her parents had died when she was sixteen, and now her sons would know that pain. Tears stung her eyes, but wouldn't flow. They were trapped somewhere between her anger and her hurt. All of his secret activity of late had her wondering if Bill had been involved in something that got him killed. Maybe it wasn't fair to think that, but she couldn't help it.

Dear God. Had the phone call been real? She looked at the bed. Was she having a weird nightmare? She searched back through the calls on the menu and discovered there had been five calls in the past eight hours. Two from 800 numbers, likely telemarketers. Two from T. Ettinger, Bill's friend Thomas, and one just a few minutes ago from a Sao Paulo area code 55-61. It had been real. Her heart squeezed with pain.

Suddenly glass shattered and Sasha and Sam started barking. Fearing the boys were up and in the kitchen, Lauren ran down the hall.

A quick glance in their room brought her racing heart to a stop before it thundered painfully harder. Both Matt and Mitch were asleep in their beds. Then who was downstairs? Had Sasha and Sam broken something? Halfway down the steps she caught sight of a black clad hulking figure standing just inside the kitchen French doors. He had a baseball bat and was trying to hit Sasha and Sam with it. Dear God!

The dogs danced in and out adeptly avoiding harm as one then the other would attempt to attack him from behind while the other from in front.

Why hadn't the security alarm gone off?

She called 911, received a busy signal, and started backing up the stairs. Cold terror chilled her spine as the man looked up and saw her. She knew he had even though she couldn't see his face or eyes beneath the black ski mask. She could feel the malevolent scrape of his stare as he stepped toward her, swinging the bat hard at Sasha and Sam. Holding up the phone for him to see, Lauren screamed, "The police are on their way!"

Then she turned and ran to the boys' room, locking the bedroom door. Her finger kept hitting the redial button until the operator answered and Lauren reported the intruder. Yet even after communicating the seriousness of her situation and being assured the police were on their way, panic still clawed at her. She shoved a dresser in front of the bedroom door and grabbed a baseball bat herself, but doubted she'd do any good against the man. He was tall, six-foot-something to her five-six. Still unable to sit and wait, she

opened the boys' window, knocked out the screen, and made sure the fire escape ladder could be quickly tossed over the sill in case they needed a quick escape.

She strained to hear footsteps on the stairs, a groan or creak that sounded out of place. Was the intruder still inside the house? Sasha and Sam's barking continued but grew distant, indicating that they were unhurt and were hopefully chasing the intruder away.

Matt and Mitch jerked awake, looking at her sleepy-eyed, their race cars in their hands. She scooped up Matt and carried him over to Mitch's bed nearer to the window and cuddled them to her sides. She explained that there'd been a robber downstairs and they had to help her listen for the police. She told them if the robber came to the door they needed to climb down the ladder and run to Mrs. Rosen's house next door.

"We'll protect you, Mom." Mitch grabbed his dart gun from the shelf next to his bed, his expression solemn and fierce.

"Me too." Matt hung over the side of the bed, Thomas the Tank Engine underwear still on the outside of his pajamas, and pulled a loaded Nerf gun from beneath it. They aimed their weapons at the door and sat bravely in intense silence.

Lauren bit back a slight smile and blinked away tears. Never mind that they regularly shot at each other with the weapons, they were doing their absolute best, and she couldn't have loved them more than she did at that moment. No matter what mistakes she'd made in life and no matter how messed up her relationship with Bill had become, these two precious souls that she'd been given the honor to love were worth any price she'd had to pay. She prayed for them and for herself as hard now as she had when she went into labor and the doctor had told her the boys were likely too premature to survive.

Though it seemed forever, it couldn't have been more than eight minutes before the squad car arrived, blue lights flashing. Lauren opened the window and yelled down at them.

They instructed her to wait until they checked everything out. The report when they gave her the okay to exit the bedroom wasn't good. Lauren kept hold of Matt and Mitch's hands as they went downstairs and entered the kitchen. They asked her questions about what happened, and she explained.

The broken panels on the open French doors leading to the terrace made her feel sick. The safety of her home had been violated and lay as shattered as the glass on the ceramic tile floor.

"Ma'am, whoever broke in tonight was professional enough to disable your security system," said Officer Jenkins. Lauren gauged the cop to be about her age, thirty-two. Judging by his calm air of command, he had years of experience on the force. He was accompanied by a younger officer by the name of McCade, who was examining the lock on the French doors with a flashlight.

Officer Jenkins continued speaking when Lauren just stared at him in disbelief. She hadn't known that someone could so easily disable the one thing she relied the most on to keep her and her sons safe. "You

notice anything out of the ordinary happen lately?" he asked. "Seen any strangers in the area or heard of any break-ins from your neighbors?"

Sasha and Sam's barking grew closer, and Lauren cleared the fear clogging her throat. "No, Officer. There hasn't been anything."

What about Bill's death? Her mind shouted at her. She glanced at Matt and Mitch and clamped her mouth closed. She didn't have any reason to connect his death with the break-in, and she couldn't let her sons learn of their father's death so abruptly either. God, she didn't know how she'd tell them, but would wait for more facts from the consulate in Brazil before she tried.

Officer McCade rose from examining the door latch. "Well, we can peg the guy as being impatient to get in. Looks as if he tried picking the lock, but then gave up finesse for brute force. A good thing too. You might not have heard him otherwise."

The chill in Lauren's spine deepened.

Sasha and Sam ran through the open door and began growling at the policemen.

"Friends, Sasha. Friends, Sam. Come. Sit," Lauren commanded. To her surprise, the dogs immediately obeyed, though they kept a low growl going and watched the policemen intently. They didn't make friends easily, and Lauren usually had to repeat herself several times. The officers looked impressed and she rolled her eyes—if they only knew the truth of things.

"Mom," Matt tugged on her arm. "Tell the policeman about the pony man. He might be mad that Sasha and Sam chased Clementine."

Officer Jenkins arched a brow. Lauren then explained the earlier incident and completely assured the policemen there really couldn't be a connection. But as she thought more about it, there could very well be more to Hank's Mr. Irresistible complex than met the eye. He'd been to her home. He knew it was just her and the boys living here. He would have had time to glance at the alarm system while taking a break during the party. Or even before the party started. He had arrived earlier than she'd expected and had wandered around the yard.

She drew a deep breath and gave Officer Jenkins a desperate look. "Would you two mind staying here for a few minutes longer while I gather a couple of things? I don't feel safe staying the rest of the night even if I could board up the broken panels of glass."

The officers agreed, and she brought the boys and the dogs upstairs with her as she grabbed a few necessities then loaded the car up for a trip to Angie's house.

"We'll fingerprint the door and outside windows and send a cruiser to regularly check on the house and the neighborhood," Officer Jenkins said they exited the house.

"Thank you."

"Just glad that you and your sons are safe, ma'am. Call if you need us." The officer handed her his card.

Lauren nodded. The police were climbing into their squad car as she pulled out of the driveway. Who had tried to break into her house and why? Was the break-in connected to Bill's death?

She couldn't reach Angie's house fast enough.

Chapter Six

Washington, D.C.

0500 hours

Bleary eyed, Jack kept his gaze glued to the TV screen. *WTF?* rang continually in his mind. The world had gone mad and marched closer to total chaos with every passing minute. Each report coming from Saudi Arabia and Qatar grew worse in scope of the damage done to the oil refining and storage facilities in both countries. More importantly, the economic and political ramifications of the attack were out of control.

The unifying Muslim world had little doubt that the US and its allies—namely Israel—were responsible for the devastation.

Already financial experts predicted a global economic collapse unlike any the world had seen before. The overseas financial markets had crashed and closed early for the day—China, Japan, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Germany, France and England to name a few. Reports were they might not even open tomorrow.

And worse yet, many moderate peace-loving Muslims now supported the radicals, joining their cry for a Jihad driven world war to ensue and for Israel's annihilation. Westerners, Jews and Christian tourists around the globe were under attack no matter what country they were from. A cruise ship in the Mediterranean had been torpedoed. A group of mountain climbers in Nepal executed. A school bus of children in Israel demolished.

He was so absorbed in the horror and the devastating implications of it all that he almost missed the news story from Sao Paulo, Brazil. Reporters questioned if murdered Atlanta businessman, Bill Collins, was also a victim in the growing hate crimes against Westerners by radical jihadists. The mug of the man they pasted on the screen was an exact match to the blond terrorist he'd shot in Lebanon.

Jack picked up the phone, his hand shaking. Was he losing his mind? How was it possible? But the more he compared the picture with his memory, the more he believed he was right. The man he'd shot was Bill Collins—or his exact double. There were nuances to the man's features and the amused glint in his eyes that were identical to Jack's memory, which happened to be coined as photographic. Even with that fact in his bank, this discovery would be a hard sell. He had difficulty believing it himself.

Jack tried to call Beck first, to see what he thought. He and Beck went back farther than either of them would like to remember, back to boot camp where as greenhorns they'd made a pact to always watch each other's back no matter what. Jack had always known that if he went MIA Beck would be the man to bring

him home and Beck would come running now if Jack needed him. All he had to do was press a few buttons and Beck would be here.

Or was that even true anymore? Something heavy was up with Beck, and Jack found himself a little torqued. Jack was the one hospital bound and Beck's ass should be the one here worrying about him. The man could sell ice to an Eskimo, and Jack could sure use him at the moment. Beck didn't answer and Jack left another message, one that left a questioning knot in his gut and had him wondering what was wrong.

The man had been to the hospital only once, just after Jack had awakened from the coma he'd been in. Beck was likely as damaged by the Lebanon blast as the rest of the team, but on a psychological level. Survivor's guilt. But hell enough was enough. "Hey, bro, it's DT. You need to stop by so I can beat your ass on the treadmill. Bring us both a beer and some poker cards too. Maybe they'll kick my ass out of here early then."

Jack hung up the phone and dialed his commander with reservation. Weston was a top of his class West Pointer who played every hand straight and narrow.

"Weston here." The man sounded as crisp and clear as an ice covered mountain. Weston had apparently regained the equilibrium after the fissure of emotion he'd shown last night and was back to his usual self.

"You've seen the news?" Jack said.

"Been up most of the night watching. It's bad. I spoke with Anderson earlier."

Considering it was just five, Jack imagined the president had been up all night as well. "What's the take on the attacks?"

"Though Israel is denying it as vehemently as we are, some are wondering if they're behind the attacks. And before you ask, yes, I tried reaching Meir again. He didn't answer and he hasn't returned the calls. None of our contacts in Mossad are responding. So getting an unofficial inside scoop of the situation is dead in the water right now. Anderson did say he was meeting with Prime Minister Shalev this morning. We're at DEFCON 2 with DEFCON 1 a breath away."

Jack grunted as his mind raced. DEFCON 2 with a strong possibility that Israel's gone rogue. Shit. He hoped to God it wasn't true and Meir would get in touch with them. Though any intel gleaned from other government operatives was in no way remotely official, it often proved to be an accurate barometer of that government's collective state of mind.

"You want my take on it?" Weston asked, surprising Jack. The commander didn't often toss out an opinion aside from what came down the brass pipeline.

"Yeah."

"I think somebody is using the US as a scapegoat for their own agenda. By making this attack on the heels of al-Qaeda's destruction to the US oil industry last week, they've got the perfect cover. It could be

one of our allies looking to strike a heavy blow against Saudi Arabia, but it could also be one of Saudi Arabia's allies wanting to knock the king off the OPEC Mountain, so there're more riches for them."

"Venezuela?"

"Iran. Any of the other countries or a combination of them, really. Sounds unbelievable, but it's a possibility considering how torqued Iran is at Saudi's cooperation with the US in the fight against radical terrorism."

"I'd believe it," Jack said. "But I've something you're not going to believe. I found the blond SOB I shot in Lebanon."

"What do you mean you found him?"

"His name is Bill Collins, a businessman from Atlanta. His mug's being plastered on Fox News as a possible victim of attacks on Westerners. Report says he was murdered in Sao Paulo last night, but I'm sure I shot him two weeks ago."

"Come on, Jack. This is stretching too far. The guy must be a look alike."

"Yeah, if they're identical twins even to a mole on the left temple."

"Someone is beeping in, I've gotta go. I'll check out this Bill Collins and get back to you, but I think you're grasping at straws."

Jack hung up the phone and started pacing, running a number of scenarios through his mind about what he'd do when Weston called back. The more Jack thought about it, the more he concluded that he'd likely have to piece together the Bill Collins puzzle on his own.

He owed it to Neil, to Pecos, to Rico, to Beck. And to himself.

A couple of hours later, he found out that debt might cost him his career. Weston's *sit down and shut up, let the blond terrorist thing go* call back about Bill Collins left Jack no choice. He had to go find out what Collins's widow knew about his activities.

Both Weston and US officials insisted Jack had to be mistaken. The Brazilian authorities swore Bill Collins had been murdered in Sao Paulo. Witnesses claimed they'd heard gunshots during the night and Bill's body had been found a short time later. And even though the report of multiple gunshot wounds to the chest matched how Jack had killed the terrorist in Lebanon, Weston insisted he needed something more than Jack's sketchy memory before taking this to the brass and arguing with the Brazilian authorities. Jack didn't have more, and one way around that problem would be if Collins's spouse asked for an investigation into her husband's death. He planned to get Lauren Collins to do that if she wasn't neck deep in her husband's shit. If she was then he'd deal with the pile when he came to it.

He left Walter Reed AMA to go AWOL.

Chapter Seven

Atlanta, Georgia

1400 hours

“You still can’t locate my husband’s body?” Lauren asked incredulously, her voice rising as she barely restrained herself from banging her head against the steering wheel. First thing this morning she’d called the American Consulate in Sao Paulo and ascertained that Eduardo Alvarez, the man who called her in the middle of the night, did indeed work there and the local police had notified them of the death of Bill Collins. But when she asked how Bill had died, they didn’t have that information and had to contact the police. Their return call fifteen minutes later bordered on the Twilight Zone of bizarre. She now knew Bill had been shot, but the morgue had misplaced Bill’s body.

“No, *Señora*. We have not. We are checking with all of the *funerárias* and *cemitérios* now, seeing if there has been a mistake. I am sorry, but I promise to call as soon as there is news, *sí?*”

“Yes, thank you.” Lauren disconnected, accepting that any frustrated ranting on her part wouldn’t produce Bill’s body. God. How did she even know it was Bill who was dead? With each passing moment the nightmare surrounding her grew.

That they were now searching funeral homes and crematories added another whole element to that nightmare. What if Bill had already been cremated by mistake? How could she ever know for sure if he was dead? And though she didn’t want to think something so vile about Bill, what if he’d faked his own death? What if his strange activities over the past two years had finally caught up with him and he’d bailed?

What other ugly surprises would come her way? More like last night’s break-in?

She shivered as she drove down her neighborhood street, alienated from the normalcy surrounding her and her life before last night.

Bill had supposedly died from multiple gunshot wounds to the chest and his body had been found in Paradise Resort’s lake just outside of Sao Paulo. His wallet, passport and his jewelry had still been on him, so robbery had been ruled out. That mainly left the option of Bill having been an innocent victim of a random crime. Maybe even a victim of a hate crime. Worldwide anger against Americans was rising and psychos were taking advantage of it.

But the more likely scenario that Bill had been involved in something criminal nagged her.

Already the Brazilian police had asked a number of questions this morning. Namely wanting information on any known drug use or if he had a history of criminal activity.

Lauren had sat in Angie's kitchen in a state of surreal numbness, whispering her answers into the telephone and referring them to Bill's Brazilian mistress, Milania Carridas. Angie was heaven sent. She'd kept the Godiva flavored coffee flowing and kept Matt and Mitch busy watching their favorite Thomas the Tank Engine videos. Meanwhile, Sasha and Sam sat at her feet each laying a paw on her shoes, clearly sensing her upset and comforting her. They did make her feel better, which was why she'd brought them along with her now.

"You two are the tops." She glanced at the White Shepherds in her rearview mirror. They'd saved her and the boys last night, and she thanked God they hadn't been hurt. Wagging their tails, they gave a short bark in response as she pulled into the driveway. She didn't bother with the garage. She wouldn't be long. Just enough time to pick up a few things and meet the handyman to board up the French doors.

According to Officer Jenkins there had been no other disturbances in the neighborhood and nothing out of the ordinary had been seen during the drive-by checks on her house last night and this morning. Still, she searched the shadows on the white columned porch and carefully scanned the surrounding gardenia bushes and magnolia trees framing the red brick home. Sasha and Sam sniffed around, acting normal as they dashed around the corner of the house after a squirrel.

She mounted the steps, recalling yesterday's pony fiasco and the boys' excitement in finding their presents from Bill on the porch. How could so much have changed in so short a time?

Her lingering gaze on the flowering red begonias framing the stairs brought a FedEx envelope to her attention. It lay on the ground between the flowers and the white wood of the steps. Getting on her knees, she reached through the railing and retrieved the envelope. It was from Bill, mailed from Brazil on the same day he'd sent the boys' presents.

Her heart thumped and her stomach flipped as she ripped open the packaging and pulled out the sealed letter. But the "My Dear Lauren" scrawled across the envelope killed her twinge of sadness as well as her desire to read the letter. She almost ripped it in half, but in the end folded it and stuck it in her back pocket.

How dare he? After his affairs and abandonment of his family, how dare he write MY DEAR LAUREN? She shoved the key into the lock and flung open the front door. *My Dear Lauren indeed.*

Moving into the foyer, she glanced up, irritated enough to spit nails then froze. The fifteen-foot entry mirror was cracked as if someone had taken a hammer to it in several places. She quickly looked around, absorbing the total silence of the house and the devastation.

Dear Lord in heaven. Everything as far as she could see had been trashed. Furniture upturned, pictures and cushions slashed, drawers emptied, their contents all over the floor. Nothing appeared unscathed. The door slipped from her numb grasp and fell shut behind her. She backed to it, heart pounding with fear as she listened for any sound.

The deafening silence told her that whoever had done this had left and a dizzying nausea washed over her. This just couldn't be happening.

Taking several deep breaths, she moved farther into the foyer and saw more of the same from where she stood. The living room, the dining room, and the kitchen. Devastation lay everywhere.

The doorbell rang and her cry of surprise remained stuck in her throat, trapped by choking emotion and shock. Approaching the peephole, she expected that one of her neighbors had come to complain about Sasha and Sam being on the loose. Instead, a rough, imposing stranger stood impatiently on her porch. He had a newspaper tucked under his arm, which likely meant he was another salesperson from the local paper, trying to drum up business.

Quietly she slipped the chain on and cracked the door open. She was in no mood to be polite. "I'm sorry. I'm not interested in anything you might be selling. There is a no solicitation ordinance in this neighborhood, so I suggest you leave before I call the police."

"Lauren Collins?" The man faced her and arched an amused brow over his sharply intent green gaze.

Rough didn't even begin to describe the man's hard edge, or reveal the almost frightening freshness of the reddened scar on his right temple. His physique and square jaw cut a determined line as did his buzzed black hair and stiff bearing. Military, she thought, immediately reminded of her brother's demeanor. Her breath caught with hope and trepidation that he was a friend of Jason's with news.

"I'm Lauren," she whispered.

"I realize this is a difficult time, but I need to speak with you about your deceased husband, Bill Collins. My name is Jack Hunter. I'm stationed at Fort Bragg." He slipped a business card into the door crack.

Their fingers touched when she took the card and she practically jerked away from the heat that shot up her arm and flushed her face. The man narrowed his gaze at her, intensifying the green of his eyes. His look was almost suspicious.

She blinked and directed her focus to his card. Sergeant First Class meant the man had about twenty years of experience under his belt. Though he wore jeans and a black polo shirt that hugged well-honed muscle and not an official uniform, his boots were the kind a military man preferred. She'd spent a lot of time online looking for just the right tactical boot Jason wanted the Christmas before he went missing. As he put it, "you get comfortable in the field in something and want that same feel even when you're off duty."

Clutching Jack Hunter's card, Lauren inwardly cried that the man was here with more questions about Bill and not with news about her brother.

"What about Bill?" She almost shivered in fear of what she would hear. What could Bill have been involved in that had the military's attention?

Just then Sasha and Sam came around the corner of the house barking in warning, teeth bared, hackles up. She reached for the chain, ready to rush to the man's rescue, yet hesitant to remove the barrier between them.

The man held out his hand to Sasha and Sam. He spoke low and friendly but with total authority. Amazed, Lauren watched the dogs sniff his hand and then wag their tails as if he was their new best friend. Apparently that magnetism worked on more than just her X-chromosomes and she had better be extra sure the man was on the up and up.

For a moment there, Jack thought he was about to be dog food and had the rolled up newspaper ready to strike, a trick an old postman showed him. Many dogs were more intimidated by a newspaper than by anything else, because owners often disciplined puppies with one. Thankfully, the White Shepherds decided he was a good guy because he seriously questioned if he was up for the challenge of fighting them both off.

Walking out of Walter Reed had been easy, but the effort to get from DC to Atlanta, get armed, and make it through traffic to the Collins' house had cost him more than he'd thought. His head pounded and his back and leg ached like hell, telling him he'd been relying on the hospital pain killers more than he should. The beating sun made sweat trickle along his spine and his head swim with dizziness. He hoped his strength would improve, but for now he could use a seat and a cold drink. Something about him and this encounter was really off.

Blame his weakened state or being celibate too damn long, but Lauren Collins's sex appeal hit him with a knockout punch the moment she cracked open the door. His instant let's-do-it attraction took him by surprise. Not only because he hadn't felt that in forever, but also because he was a smart man and long past knee-jerk hormones.

But blunt honesty had him acknowledging he'd have made a move on her if they'd been in an acceptable, social environment and both available. He was that attracted. Her sultry blue eyes, long wavy red-gold hair and lush Angelina Jolie lips fit his fantasies to a T. Even the light sprinkling of golden freckles across her nose was a turn on.

She's the fresh widow of a terrorist, he reminded himself.

Hmm. There's a big red flag he should have noticed right off. She appeared upset but not badly grieving. Surely she'd heard the reports of her husband's death.

His sixth sense grew more uncomfortable with the situation.

Though no apparent details in Bill Collins's life remotely connected him to terrorists, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah or any other radical associations or persons bent on jihad, Jack was sure he'd find them if he searched hard enough, which meant he needed Lauren Collins.

He looked pointedly at the chain latching the door, thankful he'd scouted out a nearby neutral location for her to meet him. "Would it be possible to discuss things sitting down? If you're uncomfortable here, I wouldn't mind meeting you at the Mad Jamoca Coffee House out on the main road. Oh, and here's your newspaper."

She hesitated only a moment then unlatched and opened the door. The dogs ran into the house, and she grasped the rolled paper from him, carefully avoiding contact with his hand. She'd obviously experienced the same zinger he had.

"No, here is fine." She looked at him oddly. "Sasha and Sam never accept someone that quickly."

"Dogs find me irresistible." He lowered his voice to a conspiring whisper, aiming to put her at ease. "It's an alpha thing." Which was true, but was totally outrageous for him to claim.

She shook her head, but he could see the corners of her full mouth lift slightly in response to his grin. He found himself wondering just how much sexier her real smile would be and axed the thought quick, wondering what in the hell was wrong with him. She stepped back and motioned him inside. "I'm waiting on a repairman to— Oh God, you made me forget for a moment. My house has been ransacked. I need to call the police."

"What?" Jack asked, about to enter the house. Suddenly the sixth sense niggling at him mushroomed into a bomb of warning. He whipped around and saw a ski-masked, black clad man running toward them from the shadows of the trees. The man had a Sig Sauer P226 Blackwater Tactical with a kick-ass silencer pointed their way. Jack recognized the weapon because he had the exact same 9mm pistol tucked in the back of his jeans. Only Jack's silencer was way smaller, which meant this guy had experience and meant business.

Damn. Not a good day when someone else was better equipped and got the drop on you. The wood on the door jamb to Jack's right splintered before he could move.

"Get down!" Jack reached for his gun and plowed himself into the woman, knocking them back into the house. Bullets ripped across the door and shattered the side glass panels. As he fell with the woman, he wrapped one arm around her and twisted in order to take the brunt of the fall.

Pain wrenched his back as he landed hard. He squeezed two shots at the threat coming their way, aiming much lower than he should have. The bullets would hit the ground, but damn it, this was a neighborhood. He didn't want bullets going anywhere but into the bastard shooting at them. No collateral damage on his watch.

Before the man could return fire, Jack kicked the door closed; feeling damn glad the house was brick. Their only vulnerability would be the windows and the wood.

A quick glance around revealed a large mahogany hallstand on the right. With an adrenaline-charged push, he rose up and sent the heavy stand tipping over. It slammed against the front door and wedged it

shut. The muscle strain left his arms shaking. He slid back to shield the woman with his body as two more bullets hit the door.

Barking loudly, the Shepherds came running around the corner.

“Stop! Lay!” Jack shouted. The dogs obeyed slightly, whining as they dropped close to the floor, but still inched toward them. He prayed they wouldn’t get shot. It was the best he could do to keep them safe.

“Who’s shooting at you?” the woman cried. Semi-squashed beneath him, she sounded seriously confused and panicked. She tried to wiggle away, making him even more aware of her soft curves.

“Me? This is your house.” Jack kept searching for the intruder from every angle he could stretch.

“You’re the one with a gun.” Her tone of voice clearly accused him of bringing this disaster on her.

Was she serious? “That gun happens to be saving your ass at the moment,” he hissed as she shifted and brushed something he shouldn’t even be aware of at the moment. Damn. He craned his neck, searching out the shattered windowpane for signs of the shooter.

“This just can’t be happening.” She pushed up from the floor.

“It is.” He urged her back down. “Keep your head low and move with me to the right. Make sure the dogs stay down too.”

“Sasha, Sam. Stay,” she commanded and the dogs stopped crawling. They were luckily positioned behind an upturned sofa.

She looked completely dazed, pupils dilated with shock, complexion sheet white. If she was involved in any terrorist activity it was obviously not in fieldwork. She was like a lamb in the crossfire, making him wonder how she could have any connection to her AK-47 toting spouse.

He regretted his irritation. She was upset, had a right to be upset. She didn’t know him from Adam, and the shooting hadn’t started until he came onto the scene.

Still, he could be wrong about her. Her shock could be an act to disarm him. So could her accidental contact with his groin. Whatever the truth was, he needed her glued to his side and far from any position to nail him from behind or run away. He slung a leg over her hip, keeping her anchored against him and focused on the threat. Out the side window, he saw the attacker approaching slowly, about two yards from the porch steps.

Locating a brass doorstop against the wall, Jack angled up and threw it. Sunlight glinted off the shiny surface as it sailed across the living room and demolished one of the front window panes some thirty feet away.

Somebody had done a number on her house. The place had been trashed big time. From his observation point low to the ground, Jack saw the attacker outside duck and turn in the direction of the broken window.

Jack had the perfect head shot, but his hand trembled. Bracing with his other hand, he squeezed off two rounds just as the woman shifted. And, hell, her thigh firmly brushed against his groin.

She froze, clearly realizing just how interesting he found her. He wasn't at attention in that department, but he wasn't exactly at ease either.

"Damn," he muttered. The woman was deadly, like kryptonite. Distracted by her and her movement, he'd missed the headshot and hit the target in the shoulder. It wasn't even the bastard's gun arm, either. The attacker dropped to the ground, bringing his P226 up and firing on the house, close to where they were. The woman cried out.

Jack responded with a volley of shots out the sidelight then rolled with the woman to a new position, protecting her with his body. They were face to face, chest to chest, and everything else to everything else, right down the line with him on top. She was breathing too rapidly and would likely hyperventilate. He listened intently for the slightest sound from outside, but had to calm her down, or he'd have a bigger problem on his hands.

"Shh. It's okay." He met and held her frightened gaze as something potent arched between them. "Lauren." He fixed her name in his mind. The thunder of her heart beat against his chest and the warmth of her seeped inside of him. "He can't hurt you. I won't let him, okay?"

She nodded.

"Try and take slow breaths and be as quiet as possible."

Lauren nodded again, and he couldn't stop himself from brushing his thumb along her cheek. If she was as innocent a bystander as she looked, then she was being damn brave.

Nothing but silence came from outside. Had he hit the guy with a lucky bullet?

He could hear the dogs inching closer to where he lay with Lauren and let them. A minute more, and he was going after the shooter. He wanted the dogs at her side then.

Though Jack's edge wasn't as sharp as it should be, he hadn't lost it as completely as he thought either. Adrenalin and experience made up for his injured condition.

Just then a thud on the living room floor sounded. They'd rolled the opposite way after the gunfire and now he couldn't see into the room. Had the killer crossed the porch and climbed inside the broken window without Jack hearing? He levied off Lauren and came up with his gun aimed as he ran across the foyer. Thick smoke billowed into the air.

Maybe he'd lost more of his edge than he'd thought.

Chapter Eight

Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Maryam “Mari” Dalton stared at the blurred array of chips stacked on the mini-mart’s shelf and gripped the shopping cart handles for dear life. Raw pain ripped through her as fresh as if someone had just plunged a knife into her breast. Cheetos, crunchy or puffy. Potato chips, BBQ or cheddar, ridged or baked. They all clawed at her heart and brought tears to her eyes. She blinked, sucked in air slowly, determined to hold the growing storm of grief at bay, but then spied the Doritos and the dam burst.

You, a bag of Dorries, and my ’57 Chevy are all I’ll ever want. Neil’s teasing voice echoed through her mind, a bare whisper of his deep, rumbling drawl. His comforting arms would never hold her again. He was gone. The only person to have ever loved her was gone.

She couldn’t do this. Not now. Not yet. Pressing her fist to her mouth to stifle her cry, she rushed for the exit, her head down, the folds of her hijāb covering her head and most of her face thankfully hid her distress. She hadn’t wanted to see anyone she knew, hadn’t wanted to hear the condolences that would only scrape her pain raw again. She hadn’t wanted to go anywhere she and Neil had been together, so she’d driven past the airport in Fayetteville to buy food she didn’t feel like eating but did because of the baby.

She hadn’t counted on the snack aisle. It had been Neil’s favorite section, his domain. He’d plan a get-together with the guys and then go crazy buying the snacks. Doritos were his favorite. Didn’t matter what flavor, from spicy to ranch, he loved them all and ate them with everything. He even put Doritos on his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches...

Allah, please help me—

“Miss! What’s wrong?” the elderly clerk asked as she ran past the only check-out line in the tiny food mart. She could barely meet his watery, blue-eyed gaze, magnified tenfold by his thick eyeglasses. The smattering of gray hair plastered neatly in place on his mostly bald head made her sob harder. Neil’s hairline had recently receded and he’d often ask her if she could love a bowling ball.

“I must go,” she cried, blindly rushing. She reached the exit, barely registering the blurry, dark mass on the other side of the glass until she plowed through and the door hit the man’s face.

“What the fuck!” he yelled. Blood welled in a cut above his sharp brow as he settled his hard gaze on her. His shaved head and tattooed temple were as abrasive as his aura.

Mari stood frozen, horrified she had hurt someone, but before she could apologize, the man’s features twisted with rage and he shoved the door back at her. Her nails splintered and her fingers jammed and

buckled from the force of the blow. She cried out. Thrust back into the store, her heart pounded, more from the chilling hate in his expression than from the pain stabbing up her arm.

“Hey! What’s going on?” the elderly clerk yelled, running toward her.

Mari pulled her hand close to her breast and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I—”

“Bitch!” the man from outside yelled. He jerked open the door and barreled inside. He touched his cut brow then looked at the blood on his fingers. “You cut me!”

“Let it go, Dugar,” said a second man, pushing into the store. Though sporting the same shaved head and tattoo, this man’s gaze only held disgust when he looked at her. “We don’t need any trouble. Slayer’s orders, man.”

“Let it go? That’s what’s wrong with our fucked-up country now. That’s why we’re fucking doing what we’re doing. That raghead’s whore cut me and I’m not letting it go!”

Mari staggered. She’d seen the reports worldwide about the violence. About Muslims attacking Westerners, Christians, Jews. About Westerners, Christians and Jews attacking Muslims. With the destruction of the worldwide oil industry, chaos had erupted. But that insanity, that hatred was somewhere else. Not here. Not in the place she’d come to embrace as home.

“Stop right there and get out. I’m calling the cops,” the clerk yelled, edging to Mari’s side.

“Shut up.” The raging man shoved the elderly clerk hard, knocking him into a waist-high display of pickles in huge jars. The force of the violence toppled the clerk over backward and the pickle rack collapsed beneath his weight. Jars fell, shattering on the tiled floor and gushing green fluid. Vinegar and dill fumes flooded the air, burning Mari’s nose.

Cut and bleeding several places from the jagged glass raining down on him, the clerk struggled to rise. His eyeglasses hung around his throat and pickles sat on his shoulders and lap.

“Don’t move,” Mari told the old man, moving to help him. Wasn’t there anyone else here? She couldn’t remember having seen anyone. To think she’d deliberately chosen an out of the way place she’d never been before, uncaring that the neighborhood wasn’t exactly perfect. “Help!” she screamed. She was sure the clerk would cut himself even worse if he tried to get up before some of the larger pieces of glass were moved.

“Shut up, bitch! And don’t you dare turn your back on me. Get on your knees and kiss my dick and maybe I’ll let you live.”

Mari reared back in shock, his words slapping her soul. It had been so long that she’d almost forgotten the face and touch of evil. Almost but not quite. She’d only known gentle kindness from Neil. She’d only known goodness from the people she’d met since coming to America with Neil.

“Get out,” the clerk shouted, elbowing to his side. “The cops are—” He gasped, clutching his chest, his eyes bulging with fear as the color drained from his face. Suddenly, his whole body spasmed and he fell back as if dead.

“Allah! No!” Mari cried.

The enraged man grabbed her hijāb and pulled hard to the right, jerking her off balance. She fell to her knees and the rest of her face and her hair were exposed, violating her beliefs of propriety as deeply as pieces of glass sliced through the fabric of her abaya and into her skin. Pickle juice set her cuts on fire. Tears stung her eyes.

“Let her go, Dugar.” The other man set his hand on Dugar’s shoulder. “Slayer isn’t going to like this.”

The man shoved his friend away. “Shut the fuck up, Bean. She owes me.”

Then the monster yanked her purse from where it had fallen from her shoulder and tossed it to the other man. “See what she’s got.”

Ignoring the men, Mari reeled for balance to stay upright and to protect her baby. She was sure if she fell to the ground, she’d never get up. The monster would no doubt kick her with his heavy boots. Or rape her. Or kill her. She’d lived through violence before—a lifetime ago.

As she pulled away, the last pins holding her hijāb in place ripped out strands of her hair. But it didn’t matter. All she could think of was protecting her baby and how she could keep the horror of the past from happening again.

Her mind and her body shook beneath the waves of panic threatening to incapacitate her. Just like before her abaya was trapped beneath her knees, keeping her pinned down, hindering her from escaping. She struggled to rise, her knee grinding deep into the glass as she fought to free the restrictions of her dress. She had barely wedged one foot beneath her to get up when her attacker wrapped her hijāb around her throat. He jerked her face into his crotch, cutting off her air.

She couldn’t breathe. Blood roared in her ears. Her mind screamed for her to do something. The monster wanted her to fight him, wanted an excuse to kill her and she didn’t waste precious time struggling. She pressed her face into his groin, making him think she’d do what he wanted. That was the fastest way to get air. Her smashed fingers were almost numb, but she forced herself to pull down his zipper. She nudged her head against his rising bulge, her body shuddering with revulsion she tried to mask. She scoured the ground with her unhurt hand, praying for a miracle.

The monster laughed and eased up his chokehold on her. Mari sucked in precious air. “See, Bean. She wants it. All women really want it no matter what they say, how they act, or how they dress.” He thrust his hips. “This raghead has himself a good whore.”

Mari’s heart pounded impossibly harder as she found and grasped a large shard of glass. She ignored the sting of it cutting into her flesh as she positioned herself. She only would have one chance. She pulled open one side of his fly then brought her other hand up. The full sleeve of her abaya covered the glass in her hand. Using the force of her weight, she stabbed her attacker in the groin.

Unlucky for her, he chose that moment to rock his hips and she missed his penis. Still the glass shard went deep into his abdomen. The man screamed in pain and reared back from her. Mari didn’t waste a

second. She turned, gained her feet, and ran. Both men were between her and the front exit so she ran to the back. She hit the storage room, sure she could hear pounding footsteps behind her. Her blood thundered in her ears and her vision dimmed as if she'd pass out. Panic clawed into her mind. There were two doors. One straight ahead that exited the store, bolted with a heavy padlock and chain and the other all the way across the storage area. She ran hard.

“You’re dead, bitch!” the monster screamed, coming after her.

And Mari knew she was. She pressed her damaged hands to her precious, unborn baby, and put her heart and soul into crying to Allah.

Chapter Nine

Atlanta, Georgia

Conrad Gardner shoved his clunked out SUV into gear, his foot as itchy on the gas pedal as his finger was on his under-the-pawn-shop-table double action Glock, purchased this morning complete with missing serial numbers and enough kick-ass ammo to down those damn dogs he'd forgotten about.

Until the dogs had ruined his high last night, he'd been feeling really good since Thomas tumbled to his death. It was as if some tightly leashed part of him had been freed. He was in control, for once. He was in the driver's seat and the grand prize was his for the taking and he didn't have to put up with anyone else's shit ever again.

Or had been.

He bit down on his lip until the pain matched the throb in his head and the burn in his gut.

Somebody was after Lauren, honing in like a rat on a Cheeto on the five million Bill had hidden. She'd hired herself some muscle as well. It was the only logical explanation for the two gunmen battling it out.

He'd had a back row seat to the drama at Bill's house, having arrived earlier this morning to await Lauren. She was so damn predictable, fleeing to Angie Freemont's last night. All he had to do was sneak up with a conveniently handy Super Ear he'd ferreted from a spy shop and hear firsthand her plans for the day. He'd come to the Collins' house and waited a little ways down the street with his side mirrors trained on the front of it.

Having to huddle uncomfortably in the back seat for several hours had been worth it when the promise of nailing her dogs and...well, damn, he'd always wanted to have himself a piece of her. He'd nail her too. But now that promise was dead, and he'd waited for nothing. Cops would surely be here any minute, which left him SOL.

What the hell should he do next? His cell phone had remained suspiciously silent. Considering the gravity and shock of Bill's letters and Thomas's multiple calls before he nose-dived off the sun deck yesterday, Conrad expected that Edward, Ray or Bob would have called...unless...they were in cahoots and planned on cutting him out of the five million.

Shit. He hadn't considered that. They were probably all sitting around and laughing about it. Poor Con. Well, he sure as hell wouldn't be poor Con anymore. The money would be his, no matter what.

He had to get his hands on the other letters Bill sent. Edward was a thirty minute ride across town. Ray in Savannah, Bob in Tampa, a bitch of a drive. He glanced again at the drama playing out at Collins's house and almost smiled at what he imagined Lauren's expression was when she saw the mess he'd made.

With Lauren literally pinned down at gunpoint, Conrad could nab her snot-nosed brats. After a scream or two from the kids via the phone, Lauren would likely hand over her soul, much less the letter from Bill.

Seeing her pick up the FedEx package from the porch had nearly blown his gasket. He'd spent all night pissing away precious time taking apart the inside of Bill's house with a malicious fine-toothed comb—payback for the damned dogs nearly chewing his ass off—only to find out it had been lying in the front yard all along. She owed him and he was going to make it hurt.

He pressed the gas to the floor and got the hell out of Dodge before the cops arrived.

Jack calculated that he'd wasted three of the thirty seconds it would take the spinning grenade of what he prayed to God was only CS gas to fill the room and practically incapacitate them both. Already Jack's eyes seemed to burn. Apparently the bastard outside wasn't aiming to kill Lauren, but to take her hostage—somehow an even scarier scenario because that meant they wanted something from her. Wanted something that they didn't find when they'd destroyed the house. Wanted it bad too. He swung on his heel, reaching Lauren quickly.

"Come on." He grasped her hand to help her rise and direct her from the choking tear gas. "Is there any way out this direction?"

"Through the basement."

"I'll follow you." He urged Lauren in front of him then checked to see that the dogs followed.

"Is there a fire?"

"Tear gas."

Lauren held up her cell phone. "I've called the police."

Great, Jack thought. The police were needed, but he didn't necessarily want the complication of having to answer questions, either. He wasn't exactly operating within the law himself. Not that he didn't have the right to protect himself, he just wasn't supposed to be here in the first place. And being military complicated things a bit. Huge understatement. By now he was sure Weston had gotten wind of his AMA exit from the hospital, knew exactly where he had gone, and was pissed as hell. Another huge understatement. One thing for sure though, Jack had no further doubts that he was on the right track. The set of family portraits he just walked by confirmed Bill was his man.

Just then glass shattered into the parlor they were passing through and another CS grenade hit the floor just a few feet away. A flume of tear gas spewed their direction, instantly making his eyes water even

though the thick chemical fog had yet to reach them. Jack thrust Lauren toward the basement door. "Hold your breath and run."

The dogs barked and lunged toward the grenade then yelped in discomfort, telling Jack the spewing chemical was of the extra-strength variety.

"Come!" Jack called the dogs, as he ran after Lauren. She'd opened the basement door and had headed down. He hoped like hell the Shepherd's would obey him. Even though dogs were less sensitive to the lachrymatory agent than humans, prolonged exposure to the highly concentrated chemical filling the house could seriously harm or kill them.

The dogs were still barking at the grenade, but thankfully Lauren called for them and by the time Jack reached the top of the basement stairs, the dogs were at his heels. He shut and locked the door behind them as they escaped the acrid fumes. A thick band of weather stripping surrounded the doorframe, sufficient enough to keep the gas from seeping through.

His eyes pouring, Jack sucked in deep breaths of dank air and bounded down to Lauren, his P226 at the ready. She leaned heavily against the wall, coughing and crying, in worse shape than he was.

"Hold up," he said as she reached the bottom stair. He didn't know yet if the bastard out front was operating alone or in tandem. He scouted the visible area though his watery eyes. Spying a bathroom, laundry, a rec room, no windows on this side of the finished basement and no immediate threat, he faced Lauren.

"My eyes are burning badly." Tears rolled from her baby blues, hitting him on a gut level. She looked shell-shocked, almost staggering as she blinked at him. The urge to pull her closer to him actually hurt to resist. It was damn lucky for both of them that they only were exposed to the dispersed edges of the gas.

"Stay here," he muttered. "Don't touch your face until you can wash off with soap and water; it will only make things worse. Don't touch the dogs, either. I'll be right back."

Moving silent and fast through the rest of the basement, Jack assured the area was clear, amazed at the luxury. He found a home theater and envious TV, a billiard and bar set up, a bedroom with bath, and in the middle part, a more casual living room than the one upstairs not to mention a full kitchen as well. The three stories had to be close to nine thousand square feet of living space. He'd lived in a whole lot less his entire life.

Shaking his head, he slid over to the wall of French doors lining the living room to peer outside. The terracotta courtyard was flanked on both sides by flowery gardens of low-lying plants. The open landscaping provided little room for cover close to the house. In fact, the only real hiding spot was around the large water fountain of three dolphins paying homage to a partially draped goddess rising from a sea wave. She held one arm out, with a bowl cupped in her upturned palm. Whether it was meant to be a birdbath or not, a blue jay was enjoying itself.

Who was the goddess that had been painted emerging from the sea? He'd seen that somewhere. Jack couldn't remember but he could kiss her and the sun right that moment. The nine o'clock shadow cast by the three o'clock position of the sun, didn't quite match the round bowl of the fountain's base. If he didn't miss his guess, the attacker was laying in wait for them behind the fountain. Jack retraced his steps.

Lauren hadn't done as he asked and waited on the basement stairs. She'd moved five feet to the bathroom and he found her fully clothed with both of the dogs in the walk-in shower doing her best to spray her face and the dogs at the same time. Besides the showerhead, it also had a hand-held sprayer. She had yet to see him, as her attention was focused of easing the effects of the tear gas.

Oh man. If he had betted that her curves and appeal couldn't hit him any harder than they had upstairs with her plastered against him then he'd be SOL. Water slicked, dripped and sluiced all over her. And damn, God help him or condemn him, but he couldn't help but notice her lacy bra nicely cupping at-full-attention nipples through her pink T-shirt. He took the three steps to the shower in one.

"He's out there and I'm going after him." Jack's voice, tight with tension, grated like glass.

Startled, she jerked to face him, her lush lips opening with a cry of surprise.

He moved before he could even think. Within half a second he had his pistol tucked behind him, his hand braced against the granite wall, and his face a breath away from hers beneath the water spray. Her eyes widened and a flicker of fear rippled across her features.

When had he become so unbridled? Impulsive? Had his brain taken hits from the blast that he had yet to realize? He turned his face to the full force of the water, flashed his eyes open twice, flushing away the tear gas and giving him the moment he needed to regain his sanity. After a second, he moved back and spoke again. "The gunman is hiding out back and I'm going to go around and see if I can get the drop on him. You stay locked in the bathroom. Don't open the door except for me or the police. They're coming right?"

She nodded.

He didn't stick around another minute. He turned on his heel and left, locking the door behind him. Shoving her image from his mind, he put his focus on keeping them both alive and un-captured. Leaving her locked up and alone wasn't an ideal solution, but he couldn't just sit tight with her inside. He could just see two rookie cops walking in to this situation and getting killed. Jack already knew what he was up against and had the experience to deal. So he'd take the gamble.

Jack slipped out a side window, eating grass as he belly-crawled along the garden's brick edging. Luck played in his favor as the garden was raised about six inches higher than the Bermuda. But the freaking red ant pile looming ahead was a hell of a problem. Where was a ghillie when you needed one?

Jack managed to make it. With his fingers and toes holding his weight and his body ramrod stiff, he cleared the top of the ant pile and its hoard of red defenders without triggering them to war. Human beings were supposed to be the evolved, superior form of life inhabiting the world, but more times than not, they

weren't any different—and sometimes even less intelligent—than the small-brained creatures. That men were more savage than animals was already a given. Currently most of the world was running around like homicidal red ants gone amok.

He reached the end of the garden wall and could just barely make out a black-clad man crouched behind the fountain, still about twenty meters and thirty degrees away from being in a direct line with Jack. The man faced the house, angled away from Jack and nearly completely covered by the concrete fountain, making him a hard target. There had to be a way.

Grinning, Jack steadied his aim. The blue jay had moved on and Jack made good use of the birdbath. A well-placed bullet shattered the goddess's wrist and sent the birdbath crashing on top of the intruder. The man jerked back from the fountain and Jack squeezed off another shot. He didn't go for the kill, but wanted to bring the man down. Jack planned on being the one asking the questions.

He expected the man to cave with a bullet to the back of the knee. The attacker didn't, he staggered and grabbed his leg before disappearing behind the fountain. Two return shots hit to Jack's left and he cursed himself for not taking the time to circle around through the golf course in the distance and come up behind the bastard. Jack had been too afraid the man might get to Lauren while Jack played super spy. Keeping the shooter in his sight had seemed the better option, but with his position blown, practically zero cover, and the bastard still functional, Jack realized he'd played the wrong hand. They were now at a standoff unless he—

WTF? Jack caught the gleaming glint of something being thrown at the house. It bounced off the brick and clinked over the stone toward the patio furniture and the huge stone hearth and chimney of the outdoor fireplace. When smoke didn't immediately spew and the attacker took off running with a limp, Jack's heart hammered in dread. A grenade?

The bullets Jack planted in the man's back might have been water on a duck for all the good they did. The man had to be body armored to the max. Out of time, Jack rolled like an unfurling whip away from the garden just before a blast shattered glass in a blinding flash.

Chapter Ten

Fayetteville, North Carolina

“You’re dead, bitch!” the man said again, much closer than before. Mari’s spine chilled with dread. She cried out, her gaze desperately searching too late for a weapon. Anything she could use to defend herself. Only a barrel of hard-shelled nuts was within reach. She grabbed, pulling the barrel into the attacker’s path and nuts spilled everywhere. She thought for a moment she just might make it to the room just ahead when he caught hold of her hair and jerked hard.

Her life flashed before her eyes, going all the way back to the moment she was dying three years ago. Back to the moment she first set eyes on Neil Dalton, the soldier who’d kicked in her prison door and set her free...

She’d lost track of time. Somewhere between the hunger pains and the scraping dryness of her swollen tongue against her sunken cheeks and cracked lips, she’d forgotten the number of days since her ewer of water and chunk of bread had stopped appearing in the boxed opening on her prison door. Growing up within the home overhead, she’d never questioned the purpose of the different rooms below. Only the servants or the guards bothered with those rooms. She should have known though. Should have paid more attention to the rumors. Should have taken the fear in the eyes of those under her father more seriously. Maybe then she would have been more prepared for his ruthless cruelty.

She would have rather been executed, a quick flash of pain and then be done with this life, than to agonize in solitary silence day after day, able to hear the occasional voices of those she loved. Those who’d once loved her.

But that was before. Before she’d been violated and lost all honor. The day had been hot beyond reason. She and her twin sister, Maisa had returned from the village and Mari realized her necklace was missing. Panicked, she’d rushed back to find it. Four men had found her alone on the street. They’d beaten her, raped her repeatedly and left her for dead. When she’d been found by her father’s men, she’d been blamed for enticing her attackers. Condemned to the tiny room in the bowels of what once had been her home, she’d lived in solitary confinement, never seeing or speaking to anyone in her family again, except her father. He had come to see her once—to pronounce his judgment of her guilt. She had lived that way six months, then the food and water had stopped. And as her strength waned, she realized her family had gone, had abandoned their home and left her behind, locked in a windowless room with no way out. Then

she heard the bombs, the screams of pain, the rapid fire of machine guns, and knew war had come to her village. With every hour that passed, violence marched closer and so did her death.

When the door had splintered open, she had first thought it was all in her mind. She'd dreamed of escaping so often, had fought to get out until her nails were broken and her fingers were bloody, that she actually didn't believe it when it happened. Not that she'd had the strength to run or even walk out of her cell when the armed soldier had directed his gun at her. He'd shouted for her to lie face down on the floor with her arms behind her back.

She'd just looked at him, tried to raise her hand to defend herself, but couldn't.

"Jesus!" he said, moving toward her, gun aimed at her head. She'd tried to speak, but only a rasping whisper came. "Help me."

After a stunned moment of staring, he'd picked her up and carried her from her prison. The house exploded on the heels of their escape, hit by mortar fire, she later learned. Bombs hit the village, wreaking destruction in every direction, yet the man carrying her seemed unperturbed. He ran quickly into the night, strong and confident—a warrior, an enemy who gave her more care than her own family had. He'd stopped at one point and given her water, pressing a wet cloth to her lips and made sucking motions until she realized he meant for her to draw the water into her own mouth. It seemed that he'd carried her for hours and she lost count of the times his deep voice spoke to her over and over again. "Hang in there. You're going to be fine. Fight for me. Fight to live."

Mari swore she could hear Neil now with the monster dragging her backward by her hair. *Fight for me. Fight to live.* She could have lunged away from the murderous man, hoping to break his hold. Instead, she whipped around and pushed the man, screaming loudly for help.

He stepped backward, surprised by her attack, and slipped in the nuts, going down as if someone had jerked his legs out from beneath him. Blood covered him from the waist down. She'd obviously done him some damage, but either it wasn't enough, or he was too far gone in his rage to know it. His hold on her hair loosened and she pulled free.

"Dugar!"

The man called Bean appeared at the storage room entrance.

Mari turned and ran into the room up ahead. She locked the heavy metal door behind her and twisted the dead bolt, breathing hard. It was a bathroom, industrial-type, with two stalls, double sink and no window.

Shit, she thought, then prayed she'd be forgiven for the curse before petitioning for help. Her legs shook as she scoured for a weapon. The plastic toilet seats were worthless. A plunger to the face would only enrage her attacker more rather than incapacitate him. There wasn't much else in the room besides the trash can and the...

She picked up the trashcan and slammed it into the mirror, reaping a large, curved, slice of glass similar to a scimitar. A thick wad of paper towels enabled her to hold onto one end. After giving the bathroom another search and turning up a spray bottle of Clorox-like smelling cleaner, she huddled into the farthest corner with her eye on the door.

It wasn't until her bunched abaya slid to the side and clunked on the tile floor that she realized her cell phone wasn't in the purse the men had stolen but in her pocket. Her fingers stung as she dug into her pocket then blinked back tears of relief as she stared at the full line of reception bars. 911 came first, those fateful numbers that had changed her world. She'd known nothing about jihad, nothing much about the world outside her village, hadn't even known there had been an attack on America. Her knowledge of the world and the political/religious agendas fueling global conflict had only come after her rescue. From Neil, those in his circle of friends and the television. Now that Neil was gone, had fate landed her back into the death that she had escaped? For once again, she was imprisoned in a windowless room, and death was banging on her door.

She told the emergency operator where she was located streetwise, but couldn't remember the name of the food mart. After hanging up, she began to wonder what would happen when the police did come. She hadn't thought about anything but her grief and the baby since Neil was killed. Was she even allowed to remain in the United States now? Her application for citizenship hadn't been approved yet. Would the police lock her behind bars and accuse her of wrongdoing? She had hit the man with the door first.

Heart pounding impossibly faster, she searched through her incoming calls, found the one number she swore she would never use and hit the send button.

Chapter Eleven

Atlanta, Georgia

Lauren paced the length of the bathroom. Sam and Sasha, having splattered the entire area from ceiling to floor crevice with wet dog water, sat watching her, their heads moving to the left and then to the right like a cartoon. She'd armed herself with about the only movable object of substance in the bathroom, the ceramic lid to the toilet tank. At first she'd kept it clutched in her arms so she'd have it if someone kicked in the door. But it had become too heavy, so she now had it sitting within easy reach on the vanity. She wished she could laugh at her drowned-rat mug staring back at her in the mirror, but she wasn't capable of anything more than a cry of fear. Of frustration...or was it desperation?

How about all three to the max. Normal reaction to being attacked. Thank God she had left the boys with Angie. To have had them in the middle of this unbelievable nightmare playing out was—dear God—unfathomable. A man with a gun had come to her house, was shooting at her and throwing tear gas!

What would she have done if the Jack hadn't shown up?

She'd yet to figure out what to make of him. If Jack's questions about Bill were connected to Jack's military position, then why wasn't Jack in uniform? And was it customary to show up on her doorstep armed with a gun?

And whether she wanted to admit it or not, having Jack thrust his face beneath the shower's spray had sent a shock of sexual need straight to her core. There was just something about having his electric gaze intent on her that heated her inside and out. Not to mention his chiseled jaw and full mouth. The strength of her hot flash had scared the living daylights out of her. How could she even feel that in the middle of the situation she was in?

Through everything he had been cool, calm and capable with capital Cs. She was very grateful to him, but anything else she had better pull the plug on. She didn't know who he was or what he wanted from her.

Still, what would have happened to her without him? The shudder that wracked her spine at that thought had everything to do with shock from the intruding violence and nothing to do with her wet state beneath the blowing AC vent.

Her gaze shot upward. Tear gas would get into the central air system and spread everywhere. She quickly climbed onto the sink and stretched to reach the vent's lever, but couldn't. What little exposure she'd experienced had been horrible until she'd reached the water and washed away the burn. The thought of suffering more of the same was terrifying. Determined to reach the shut off valve, she moved the wicker

clothes hamper over to the sink, planning on hefting it onto the vanity top and lay it on its side for as stepping stool to reach the vent.

But then she spied the towel bar and had a better idea. After wrangling the wooden dowel free, she climbed back on top of the counter, and shoved the vent off with the stick.

Before she could get down, an explosion outside shook the house. Startled, she teetered on disaster and lost the battle. She landed on the wicker hamper in a painful mini-explosion of dried straw and plastic. The ceramic toilet lid she'd placed on the edge of the counter fell to the floor and broke into a dozen pieces. It came within inches of conking her on the head. Stunned, she couldn't do anything more than blink as Sam and Sasha came over and licked her face, whining their concern.

What in God's name had happened outside? She didn't bother to brush off the straw as she rolled out of the pile of wicker rubble and ran to the door. It was all she could do to keep from opening it and just force her ear to the crack. Was Jack all right?

Jack jumped to his feet within seconds of the explosion, his ears ringing. In a glance he saw the black-clad figure escaping toward the golf course, but couldn't chase him down. What if Lauren had left the bathroom? She'd be a pin-cushion of glass if she been anywhere near the French doors. He had to check on her and the SOB had known it too.

The damage to the patio's brick and stone was minimal, but the glass-paneled French doors were toast, and anyone unlucky to be within five meters of the blast would be shredded with glass shards.

Jack ran like hell to get inside the house to Lauren, thankful he didn't find her or the dogs lying in a pool of blood. He banged on the bathroom door and shouted her name. Where in the hell were the cops?

The door swung open immediately and her gaze ran over him from head to toe. It might as well have been her hands for the effect it had on him. His relief to find her unharmed was just as strong.

"What happened?" she asked.

The dogs tried to barrel out of the bathroom, and he blocked their escape with his body, stepping into the doorway. This put him even closer to Lauren and the scent of lavender soap eased over him. She must have washed from head to toe, clothes and all. The see-through effects of her wet T-shirt were covered with a towel hung about her neck. He breathed deep before speaking. "Better to keep the dogs in here while we talk. There's shattered glass everywhere out there." He pulled a piece of wicker from her hair and furrowed his brow.

"Don't ask." She blew the straw from his fingers. "Just tell me what happened."

"A flashbang."

"A flash what? Where's the gunman?"

"He took off for the greener pastures of the fairway at the moment. A flashbang is non-lethal grenade meant to stun combatants for a few minutes. A bright flash blinds opponents and then a loud explosion

messes with the fluid in the ear, disorienting them. I think this guy added an extra umph to the package, because the glass all across the back, basement level of the house is shattered. Let's get out of here."

"The police—"

"Aren't here yet. We're not waiting on them either. The shooter could come back and your safety is top priority." He took hold of the dogs' collars and let the bathroom door fall open. Only then did he see the busted hamper and toilet lid. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Lauren.

"I told you not to ask," she said, pointing the towel bar at him. She didn't hold the stick like someone trained in warfare. Still, she managed to make the dowel look threatening. Then again, every smart man knew any weapon in a woman's hand made it twice as dangerous.

"Follow me." He avoided the shattered glass by going to the side windows he'd crawled through earlier. Pausing while in the relative safety of the house, he studied Lauren a moment, his mind clearing enough from his initial adrenaline rush to realize he needed a handle on the situation before he went any farther.

Not that he wasn't already past the point of walking away, he thought, gazing into her troubled blues. He was thinking things he had no business imagining, which was a step away from doing. And he'd killed her husband. He winced beneath the rip of guilt, wondering if he should tell her. A fact like that was a game changer and he'd yet to find out what game they were in. "You want to tell me what your secret admirer is after? He obviously didn't find it when he trashed your house."

Lauren stared back at Jack. She didn't know what to think of the savage emotion that had gripped his features for a moment. Though it had been but an instant, she'd seen beneath his cool mask and the emotions there were turbulent. She took a mental step back, glad she still carried the towel bar. "I don't know."

And she really didn't know what was going on, except Bill seemed to be a common factor. If he wasn't already dead, then she was fast approaching the point that she wanted him to be. Well, that wasn't exactly true, but she'd really like to clean his clock.

Jack scoffed at her answer as he leaned back and scanned the area outside the open window. He managed to do all of that and change the clip in his lethal gun at the same time. Whatever he saw or didn't see outside satisfied him, because he faced her and leaned his shoulders back against the wall as if unhurried.

"So. Everything has been fine except today you find your house destroyed and a man appears out of nowhere gunning for you, right?"

Everything fine? Lauren thought. Things hadn't been fine for a couple of years. "It's more complicated than that," she finally said. "And some of it is personal. As far as the house, this guy must be the same one who broke in last night. The dogs chased him off, but he had to have come back after the

police and I left and ransacked the place without the cruisers patrolling the neighborhood detecting him. Not a real confidence booster. They gave me an all was quiet report this morning.”

Jack straightened from the wall, his every honed muscle stiffening with alarm. “What happened last night? Why the hell haven’t you mentioned this already?”

“It’s not like there’s been a spare minute with nothing going on.”

He motioned impatiently. “Tell me.”

“I was home with my twin sons. It was about two in the morning and a large man dressed in all black broke in through the kitchen. Thank God I had gotten a call a few moments before and was awake because I might not have heard him otherwise. He’d disabled our security alarm. So while the police were here, I packed up the boys and went to a friend’s house for the rest of the night.”

“Were you followed when you left?”

Lauren’s body went numb from a wave of shock. The no she’d been about to utter died in her throat. “I don’t know. It never even occurred to me.” She dug her cell phone from her pocket and hit the speed dial to Angie’s cell. It went straight to voice mail. She dialed Angie’s house phone. It rang and rang. No answer. “Oh, God,” she cried, her voice rising. “I’ve got to go.” She scrambled for the window opening, an uncoordinated mass of nerves and muscle.

“Don’t panic.” Jack helped her up with a firm hand to her thigh, then her butt when she had trouble, and then her foot when she had even more trouble. She supposed she should have let go of the towel bar, to get a better grip on the window sill.

“There could be a simple explanation,” Jack added way too calm compared to the urgency clawing at her. “I’ll take you there. How far away are they?”

Once outside, Lauren looked back at Jack framed by the window. She was so unsure and so torn and so worried that her stomach cramped hard. Every step of the way from the bathroom to the window she’d deliberated on what to do next. She had really wanted to wait for the police at that point rather than to take off with Jack. But she hadn’t wanted to hang around the house by herself either. She had planned to wait for the police at the entrance to the subdivision no matter what. Even if Jack said she shouldn’t. It hadn’t escaped her notice he might have an ulterior motive for wanting to leave before the police came. And if that was true, then she also had to question if he was rushing her off because HE wanted her just as much as their attacker had.

Jack had shown up first and he was armed.

Though he’d proven himself in one respect by protecting her, she still didn’t know who he was and what he wanted to know about Bill. And in light of everything happening, if he had a connection to Bill, she had better find out what that connection was before she trusted the man completely.

Given those considerations, even as worried as she was about her sons, she didn't just want to hop in the car with a relative stranger. But then, if her sons were in danger Jack was the kind of man she definitely wanted around. So she didn't want to break with him...yet.

Besides, the police weren't exactly proving their competence at the moment. Though on patrol, they'd missed her house being trashed and currently, ten minutes past her 911 call and counting, they weren't here.

"Tell you what. I'll drive myself, but you can follow me." She clenched the towel bar tighter.

Jack looked at the towel bar then he arched a deadly eyebrow, making her realize that everything about the man was lethal one way or another. He didn't argue with her though.

"Not an ideal arrangement. But I can work it. The upside is I can make sure no one tails you now. Give me your cell number." He exited through the window in a single, smooth step, his gun at the ready.

Lauren rattled off the number then redialed Angie's cell. It went right to voice mail again.

Jack nodded as he motioned for Sasha and Sam. The dogs bounded up, already responding to his silent commands. Moments later, after skirting through the shadows, he had her and the dogs situated in her car, but then climbed into the passenger's seat.

"You need to take me to my car up the street and then wait for me to lead the way out of the subdivision. I don't know if he's waiting ahead to ambush you or not, but there is no use taking any chances."

Lauren was completely out of her element. An ambush ahead never crossed her mind. "Okay." She set the towel bar beside her in the seat and started her car. She backed to the street and as she shifted to drive, she saw Jack tense. A black sedan came their way from farther down the street. She recognized the front tag. "It's my neighbor."

"How do you know?"

"He has a carrot on his front vanity plate. Hates his job, but can't walk away from the perks. The company leases him a new Mercedes every year."

Jack laughed, an easy, deep rumble. "My kind of guy. My car is the dark blue sedan up on the left."

"Why did you park down here?" She frowned, and glanced fearfully his way. "You were expecting trouble, weren't you? Who are you and what in the hell is going on?"

"I'm trained to expect trouble, but I'll be honest. I wasn't sure what kind of reception I would get, so I parked here just in case. I have reason to suspect your husband might have a connection to a radical group."

Lauren slammed on the brakes, throwing them both forward. "What do you mean by a radical group?" Then she held up her hand. "No. Don't tell me. I don't want to know now. I just want to get to my sons." The blood drained from her head to the point that her vision wavered a moment.

"Damn." He opened the door and exited the car. "Just drive. And drive carefully. When you get to your friend's street, park down the block like this and wait for me to give the go ahead before you get out.

You don't want to walk into the business end of a gun if you can help it. If I see anything suspicious, I'll call you. Just keep in mind that I'm the good guy here, okay?"

She nodded, her throat too clogged with fear to speak. She wanted to scream. She wanted her boys safe in her arms. She wanted her life back.

Chapter Twelve

Dubai, UAE

Press conference cameras flashed, George smiled broadly, and a rush of pride over his *hijo perfecto* filled Andreas. Photographers and reporters from around the world were all loving George. Dressed in a hand-tailored suit, shirt and tie made to match Andreas's Italian silk and sporting their ever present St. Jude medals, George was the ideal poster chimp for bringing attention to Andreas's Primate Preservation Reserve in Africa and spinning the right public perception of GreenWorld Corporation (GWC).

By committing in advance a percentage of his soon-to-be astronomical profits, Andreas had neutralized future cries of capitalistic price gouging and created an ambience of benevolence that would pave the way for GWC's global energy monopoly and a new world order.

Exuding presidential confidence, Andreas began the opening notes for his perfectly orchestrated prelude to power, his tone commiserating, authoritative and calm. He'd practiced hours and hours with a tutor to remove even a trace of gutter-*Mexicana* from his voice and replace it with an indistinct, European flavor, just as his plastic surgeon had transformed his face. His features and public accent were ambiguous of origin, exactly what he needed to blend and garner as few personal questions as possible. They were perfect.

Everything was perfect except for the dark blot Bill Collins was turning out to be. Fidel's call a few minutes ago threatened to not only ruin Andreas's shining moment, but could cause some serious problems. Guru had finally deciphered Bill's encrypted emails, which produced delivery confirmation from FedEx on eight packages. Eight packages mailed supposedly by Bill from Sao Paulo to different places in the US a week after his death. Andreas's instincts were screaming at him. He wanted to know who those packages went to and what was in them. He told Fidel to pull out the stops on all satellite data resources and to put more operatives on the situation with orders to kill. Andreas refused to consider that his entire operation might be in jeopardy. If no one was left alive to speak then no tales could be told.

He cleared his throat and smiled at the crowd gathered in the luxurious room. "First, I thank you for coming. And I thank my good friend, Saleem Al-Jabar, for my welcome and accommodations here at Burj Khalifa and the Armani Hotel." Andreas nodded to the oil-rich investor who had contacted him the moment his helicopter had landed in Dubai this morning. "Considering recent unfortunate events and the international energy crises we are facing because of them, I and the employees of GreenWorld Corporation have committed to working twenty-four/seven in order to bring GXP technology to the world faster than

previously planned.” Andreas continued on, explaining GWC’s purpose—at least what of it the public was allowed to know—then he opened up to answer the pre-submitted questions he deemed appropriate. “Number sixteen.”

The reporter, a doughboy with wire-rims and stubby fingers, stood, chest puffed with pleasure at being the first to speak. “Why not supply GXP immediately?”

Because everyone hasn’t suffered enough yet, Andreas thought with a smile. He wanted desperation. He would be their savior. “We’re working with regulators and suppliers to speed up the process. GXP’s projected launch date wasn’t until next year,” he told the crowd, though he knew two years ago, he would be launching the biofuel now. “Fortunately we are efficient and ahead of schedule with production and hope to make a difference in the suffering soon.” He called out the next reporter’s number.

“What makes GXP any different from other biofuels trying to fill the oil gap?” Unlike doughboy, this reporter had shark potential. No more questions from FVX Newsroom. Andreas wanted doughboys.

“Excellent question and one that will be answered completely a few days from now on the live tour CNN will make at GreenWorld Corporation’s main facility in Peru. I encourage everyone to tune into the broadcast. But to explain briefly, GXP has double the energy power of oil at a third of the cost and next to minimal carbon pollution. It is the perfect fuel.” Andreas saw Saleem exit the press conference, likely to assure their evening meal was being perfectly prepared.

After five more questions Andreas posed with George before handing his son to his nanny and then traveling ten meters per second to the 122nd floor. He joined Saleem at the newly opened *atmosphere*, the ultimate dining experience at the top of the world. Moonlight had turned the Persian Gulf into a sea of silver and the nighttime cityscape of Dubai was like a magnificent scattering of jewels amid the desert sands.

Andreas surveyed the elegance with a critical eye, debating if gluttonous energy wasters like the Burj Khalifa would have to come down in order to preserve the world for George and his kindred. He’d hate to destroy such perfect luxury; perhaps he could confiscate it for his personal use.

He also knew why Saleem had sought him out this past year. The man was a gofer for UAE’s president Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a man smart enough to know that staying on top in the future meant he couldn’t have all of his golden eggs in the oil barrel.

“My friend,” Saleem stood and greeted him.

Andreas returned the salutation and gave a slight nod of respect. When it came to international relationships, Andreas already knew from his drug-lording, if a man bows too low he should expect to get his head chopped off. “It is good to see you.” Saleem waited until Andreas took his seat. An array of hot teas—cardamom, saffron and mint—along with delicate finger food waited on the pure linen and silver adorned table.

“Yes. The Sheikh sends his best as well. He wishes to spare no expense to see to your comfort.”

“Thank you. I am honored. Tell him my thoughts are with him during these turbulent times. I can’t quite believe what has happened.”

Saleem nodded. “We are not surprised. Something like this has been expected since Bush declared war on Islam with his Iraq invasion. Greed and not some ideology of freedom drives American tanks and guides their warheads. Already, our investigation of the terrorist attacks on Qatif and Dukhan last night are producing clear evidence of the culprits. The streets of Israel and the US will flow with the blood of the dead and dying.”

Andreas sat forward, forcing shock to stiffen his features as he bit back a satisfied smile. “What evidence? I believe hands down that Israel would act with such viciousness. But it is incomprehensible the US would. To destroy the worldwide oil market? That would be suicidal. Are you sure?”

Saleem shrugged. “We shall see. This does bring me to why I asked to see you on your visit to Dubai. I will be more blunt than ever before. The Sheikh would consider it a personal offense should the US or any of its allies have any part of your company or the production of GXP. He wants you to know that no amount of money is too high for him to either purchase your company and GXP, or to assist you in its production. What you have accomplished in the Peruvian soil can also be done upon Arabian sands.”

Andreas sat back and smiled. The gloves were off, and the fight amid the ruling super powers was about to get dirty. *¡Excelente!* He was a true genius.

Saleem Al-Jabar aka Rashid (Rash) McGuire furrowed his brow into a worried frown as if he was insecure about his audacity. Living deep undercover for Uncle Sam didn’t often have a reward, but this time he was sure he’d hit on the right target. Andreas was a little too over the top, a little too giddy, a little too willing to be led. And somehow just a little too familiar to him. He’d seen this man’s eyes before, though everything else was wrong. Rash suspected that something was rotten somewhere besides Denmark and he aimed to find it. Now if he could just remember who in the hell this guy was and what he might be up to now, then Rash might—

What? his conscience demanded. Look into having a real life? Even after ten years the failure gutting his soul was all consuming. He didn’t deserve a life. He turned his attention back to his prey and made a slight subservient motion with his hand. “Was I too blunt, my friend? Let me pour you some tea. And, please, let us continue with our meal and I will better explain the Sheikh’s sentiments.”

Chapter Thirteen

Fayetteville, North Carolina.

“You know what to do.”

Jack’s voice mail. Lt. Col. Roger Weston hung up the phone, leaving zero evidence that he didn’t know where Jack was, and silently cursed the man for putting him in this position. Jack left AMA to go AWOL and Weston was currently IGNORING protocol he was sworn to uphold. Why in the hell had he told the hospital admins that Jack was with him, and to stand down in filing an official report?

You know why, you SOB, his conscience quipped, lashing out from the bed of guilt it had been lying in for weeks now. He scrubbed his hands over his face, sure he had to be losing his mind. He wasn’t alone in that. Ninety percent of the world was with him and the other ten percent were on the brink. Global paranoia was fueling an east to west societal meltdown on an apocalyptic scale, as if all sanity hinged on the toppling oil market.

Anarchy was but a slick away.

The roots of what was happening now went deeper than that the recent events. Years deeper. Worldwide, the insidious misinformation seeded by religious and political factions over time in their agenda-driven rather than principle-guided campaigns had now bloomed and no one was capable of seeing reason.

It pained him to include the stars and stripes he served in that crime. But he had to. The US held some responsibility for leading the world down this path. They sure as hell hadn’t fought it in the very least, nor had they been any sort of a lit beacon to shine through the maelstrom of lies.

It used to be simple. There was good. There was bad. And a man knew where he stood without politically correct bullshit clogging up the pipes. Now the lines were so blurred, nobody knew where they were. Or who they were in some cases.

Oh, the rearing of extreme evil—of the serial killer variety—was still discernable. At least in most places, but the rest was a roiling dark cloud of confusion.

For once Roger didn’t envy his cousin, Paul Anderson, the sitting President of the United States. Growing up, he had, though. Paul had been the star of every show from top scholar to ace quarterback. He was a legend in their hometown and the impossible example that every male and more subtly every female born in the family after him was expected to match.

Roger's mother, Paul's aunt though only a decade older than him, made no pretenses about it. She expected her sons to follow her nephew's shining path and still did. Roger had towed the line to some degree, but his brothers had rebelled. And depending on one's perspective were either lucky or unlucky enough to be world-wide adrenaline junkies. There wasn't a mountain they hadn't climbed, a wave they hadn't conquered or a cave they hadn't spelunked. Currently, they ran a treasure hunting operation in the Florida Keys and hired themselves out as personal guides in extreme adventures.

Roger just about wished he was there with them, downing an icy beer rather than dealing with the hot items burning him alive at the moment. Jack being one.

What was he going to—? Roger's cell rang and he snatched it up, expecting Jack had come to his senses. Neil Dalton's name flashed on the LED and Roger's heart came to a crashing standstill as a fresh tidal wave of guilt and reality washed over him.

Major Neil Dalton formerly of the 75th Ranger Regiment and one of the best damn men in Delta was dead. His blood was on Roger's hands. And his pregnant widow was on the phone.

"Weston."

The jagged breaths coming across the phone wrenched Roger's heart. Mari's dam of unbelievably tight control over any public display of emotion must have burst. From the moment he'd knocked on her door to tell her Neil wasn't coming back, he'd yet to see her cry, but knew she did. Her red-rimmed eyes were a constant testimony to her grief. He'd told her to call if she needed anything at all. Yet, he was still surprised she'd finally reached out for help.

"I'll be right there," he told her though she hadn't said a word.

"Help me, please. I'm not at home." The desperation in her whisper sent a chill down his spine.

"Where then?" He stood and walked out the door of his house. He'd left the post an hour ago to think at home about all the crap coming down the pipe.

"Food mart. Highway 87. South of airport."

Roger opened his mouth several times then clamped it shut before he could demand to know what in *the hell* she was doing there. A loud banging vibrated the line followed by the most profane string of derogatory hate that Roger had ever heard and that was saying a lot. Mari cried out, "Please hurry."

"What *the hell* was that?" Roger demanded, unable to keep his cool any longer. He slid into his car and was pushing past the speed limit in six seconds, determined to make the ten minute drive in five.

"Angry man. Wants to...kill me. I'm locked in the bathroom."

He didn't know what was going on but the frustration of not being able to immediately help had him twisted onto a massive knot of seething rage. "I'm coming. I'll call the police and call you back."

"I've called them."

"Okay. Then talk to me. Do you think he can break down the door? You have to arm yourself and hide if you can." Roger hit Interstate 95, heading toward Highway 87, his speedometer past ninety.

Nothing about his surroundings registered except if it blocked his path. He could hear the man yelling at Mari again but the phone crackled. Then he heard Mari gasp. "I think I hear a siren."

Roger sucked in air, realizing he'd forgotten to breathe. "Good. Tell me what happened."

"I needed food. I didn't want to go any place where...where I'd been with Neil and just drove around then saw this place. I was fine until the Doritos." She exhaled hard. "Then I couldn't finish. I had to leave and I opened the door too fast and hit this man with the door. He went crazy. His friend tried to get him to leave, but he wouldn't. Not until he punished me. He pushed the clerk into a pickle stand. I think the clerk was so upset that he had a heart attack. Then the man came after me...he...he...Allah help me. He tried to make me touch him, but I stabbed him with a piece of glass and ran in here."

It was a miracle the steering wheel didn't crack beneath the force of Roger's grip as he exited onto Highway 87 and floored the gas pedal. His gut and his heart were stuck somewhere in his throat, making it hard to breathe or speak. He forced the question through his clenched teeth. "Did he hurt you? Hurt the baby?"

"No. Please. Not like before. I escaped this time. No shame. Please. They will not send me back, will they?"

Before? Neil had mentioned that Mari had suffered a traumatic experience in Afghanistan, but hadn't revealed what. Dear God. Had she been raped? "Nobody is going to send you anywhere. Don't worry about that. I'll make sure of it."

"But I hurt the man. Won't they make me pay for that?"

"You were defending yourself. Is the man still there?"

"I think he left. The sirens are closer. He said he was going to kill me."

"He won't get near you. I promise. I see the police pulling into the parking lot now. Just hold on."

The police were already out of the car with their Glock 22's drawn when Roger pulled into the parking lot. Glass from the double doors to the food mart lay in a shattered pile on the sidewalk. One officer turned his pistol toward Roger and shouted something. Mari was still on the phone talking so Roger missed what the officer said.

Roger shoved the car into park and held up his hands, showing the officer he was unarmed. He pointed at the phone then rolled down the window. "There's a woman trapped in the bathroom. I have her on the phone. She's the one who called 911."

The officer stepped closer, pistol at the ready, but barrel pointed to the side. "Who are you?"

Delta didn't wear uniforms or regulation haircuts. They did little to set them apart from any regular Joe on the street. He held up his Fort Bragg ID pass.

"Her husband's military commander, Officer Cain." Roger noted the man's name. Though young, the man seemed calm and in control. "There were two men involved and I'm sure the clerk inside needs an ambulance. I'll wait here until you check the place out."

The cop nodded after a hard stare and rejoined his partner, who was plastered against the wall outside of the store. At the same time they rushed through the front door, one dropping low, the other high, then they disappeared inside.

“Stay where you are,” Roger told Mari over the phone. “The police are checking the store out now.”

“I can’t come out,” Mari said. “They can’t see me. I’m indecent.”

“He ripped your clothes?” A dizzying rush of rage sliced through him. What had she been through?

“My hijāb. He took it. He tried to choke me with it. It is improper to be seen in public without it.”

Roger let his head fall back to the headrest and mentally counted to regain his equilibrium. He was one hundred percent positive that if Mari’s attacker walked out the door at that moment, Roger would strangle him with his bare hands, police or no police.

“Are you there, Mr. Weston?”

“Yeah.” His voice grated hoarsely. “Call me Roger, so the police know that you know me.” He glanced through his car for something she could use and produced a clean towel from his gym bag. He could hear a multitude of sirens growing closer. People were stopping on the street to look.

“The police want me to come out,” Mari said. “I can’t.”

“Hold on. I’ll be right there.” Roger exited and locked his car then slowly approached the front of the store and called out. The scent of pickles tickled his nose. “Officer Cain. Can you hear me? It’s Lt. Col. Weston.”

“I hear you.”

“Mari won’t come out until she has this towel. The bastard took her headscarf. He tried to choke her with it. She’s Muslim.”

A moment of silence followed. “Don’t touch anything. You can bring it here.”

Roger crossed the threshold, his eyes quickly adjusting to the lighting. The clean and orderly set up of the food mart was violated by the remnants of violence...and death, he thought as he ran his gaze over the elderly man lying in a bed of glass, pickles and blood. That it could have easily been Mari in the pile as well burned in his gut. He moved to the back of the store and storage room with a grim determination to nail the bastards responsible. He crossed the hazardous sea of nuts on the ground and joined the policemen.

The officers had their guns drawn, and were situated outside the bathroom in defensive stances. They were still in full alert mode. Roger knew Mari wasn’t a threat, but they didn’t. Roger held up the towel and his hands to assure them he was unarmed. “Let me talk to her and give her this.”

Officer Cain nodded. “Go ahead, but tell her to come out with her hands where we can see them. Until we know what went down here, we aren’t taking any chances.”

“You can’t these days,” Roger agreed. He moved over to the door. “Mari, it’s Roger. I have a head covering for you. You can open the door. It’s safe now.”

Roger heard a low moan then the clicking of a bolt. The door cracked open and, oh shit, a paper towel wrapped bloody hand stuck out. Several drops of blood plopped onto the floor. His stomach flipped.

“You’re hurt! Move back.” Screw propriety. Sometimes there were more important things. “I’m coming in.” Roger glared at the cops, daring them to argue with him. They lowered their Glocks and nodded.

Roger slid into the bathroom. Mari turned from him with a cry. She faced the wall with her head bowed as if shamed. He plopped the towel on her head, covering the thick mass of wavy, impossibly long hair the color of black lacquer. He was damn certain he should be wrapping her cut hands instead. He moved around to face her and crouched down to look into her haunted amber-gold eyes. “I don’t know what you have to do, or how you have to think of me in order for it to be acceptable with your beliefs for me to help you, but whatever it takes, do it or think it because that’s what’s going to happen. Understand?”

His breath hitched. In the two years he’d known her, Mari had always been covered with only her eyes visible, and all too often her gaze had remained downcast during any short conversation. He’d never actually seen her before. Roger had supposed shyness and her religious upbringing dictated her interactions and he had always made sure he was as kind and as respectful as possible. Now as he looked at her and realized just how secluded and hidden she constantly lived, he found himself really questioning why. God didn’t create beauty and bury it in the dirt. Nor did God mean for the human heart and spirit to be hidden from the world. Lights were meant to shine in the darkness. Frightened out of her mind, disheveled, blood smeared on her honey-cream skin, she had to be the most stunning woman he’d ever seen.

“The ambulance is here,” Officer Cain called out.

Roger didn’t wait for Mari to answer; he swept her into his arms and carried her out to the paramedics. But the way she exhaled and let her head rest against his chest was answer enough.

Chapter Fourteen

Atlanta, Georgia

Lauren released the steering wheel, her hands cramping from the intensity of her grip. She had just lived the longest, most agonizing ten minutes of her life, and now that she'd finally made it to Angie's neighborhood, she realized her angst had only begun. Seeing Angie's car in the driveway, parked exactly where it was sixty minutes ago was not a good sign. During the multiple unanswered calls Lauren had made on the drive over, she had desperately prayed that Angie had taken the boys out to eat and had forgotten her cell phone at home.

So finding Angie's car left Lauren facing the increasing possibility that her sons and her best friend were in danger. She'd made a grave mistake. She'd always abdicated the protection of herself and her family to someone else, something else, or the Shepherds. She knew absolutely nothing about self defense. She didn't have a gun, didn't know how to use one, had never even touched one. Not that she would go barreling into Angie's house with a gun drawn like a TV show, but she fully realized 911 wouldn't have done her a damn bit of good against the gunman at her house. 911 only helped if there was the time and the opportunity to call for help, and the police were able to arrive in time to do any good. What were the odds all of those elements would work that smoothly every time?

She—

The front passenger's door opened and she barely stifled the scream rising in her throat as Jack slid into the seat. Her blind grab for the towel bar came up empty. It had fallen between the seat and the console. She made a mental note to get her hands on a better weapon.

"I'm about ninety-five percent sure you weren't followed," he said. "But there's an off chance I didn't spot a tail, so stay alert. The traffic and the short distance didn't work in our favor. Which house?"

"The tan one with the red Camry in the driveway. The car is parked exactly where it was when I left. They should be there. They should be answering the phone."

Jack reached over and touched her hand. His fingers were warm, comforting. The summery day was hot, but she was cold, an icy fear had wrapped her in a chilling grip.

"Hang in there. We'll find your sons and we'll keep them safe." His calm assurance brushed soothingly over her knotted angst.

She blinked back the moisture in her eyes and inhaled. She believed him. She had to.

He scanned the neighborhood. "I'm going to circle around and check out the house from the back. You can't stay here. You're a sitting duck parked in this car, especially if he managed to follow us. Come with me, but when we get close to the house you have to stay hidden until I give the go ahead. Got it?"

"Yeah." She'd crawl through fire to get closer to her sons. She had feared he would leave her behind; insist she stay in the stifling car. The wait would have driven her crazy.

"Bring the dogs with us. If your sons are being held hostage, the dogs might help." He didn't waste any more time. He checked the area again and exited the car.

She clipped on Sasha's and Sam's leashes then, at Jack's direction, she followed his lead, keeping to the shadows. The older neighborhood was lush with sprawling oaks, gleaming hedges and rolling lawns. Sunday afternoon in a populated city came at her, the drone of traffic and lawnmowers, a tinny radio, distant children shouting and laughing, a dog barking. Nothing sinister. Just an apple-pie-and-pass-the-grits normal day in the South, which made her situation even more surreal.

Alarms should be going off.

She should be screaming for help.

The world should be at a standstill instead of marching along as if nothing were wrong.

Even the fragrance of blooming tea roses and honeysuckle warmed by the afternoon sun were too cozy. The scent grated harshly over her nerves.

She stumbled as Sasha and Sam plowed ahead, pulling hard against their leashes. Jack caught her elbow and then reined the Shepherds in with a quiet, firm command that had them moving stealthily at his side. Move over, Dog Whisperer, there was a new Alpha in town.

Luckily there were only hedges to navigate through between this end of the block and Angie's house. Farther down were the fences, likely enclosing swimming pools as required by law.

In less than two minutes, they were one house away from Angie's. Since the boys' birthday party yesterday, the unfolding events had skewed Lauren's perception of time, tilted it sickly on some warped, metaphysical axis in her mind. She wanted everything to happen instantly.

Jack approached the house from the right side where a wealth of tree coverage went all the way to the windows of Angie's three bedroom ranch. Angie often complained about the oak's branches creaking during strong winds or a heavy rain, completely sure they'd land in her bed one day. Lauren waited one house away, beneath the dark overhang of a carport attached to a storage shed. Gardening tools and a lawn mower filled the space and she grabbed a trowel, figuring its sharp prongs could do some major damage. Jack silently moved to each window and peered inside then disappeared around the corner of the house.

She held her breath as precious seconds ticked by.

He came back looking grim. "The back door is ajar and the house is empty."

Lauren moaned, somewhere between a scream and a cry.

He grabbed her arms. “Listen. There’re no signs of violence or a struggle, so don’t go jumping to conclusions yet.”

“Let me look,” she whispered, her heart struggling to beat as her mind raced. Angie wouldn’t have left the door open. And if a gunman had taken either Matt or Mitch hostage, there would be no signs of a struggle. Angie would have cooperated.

She might have left some sort of hint or clue, Lauren thought to herself and prayed to find something. How did mothers ever face this horror? Missing their child or children. Not knowing what was happening to them? If they were okay...hurt...oh God.

Trowel clutched in hand, Lauren followed Jack as he again cautiously approached the house from the back. Her stomach churned. A cold sweat had her palms damp and her body shivered as she crossed the threshold.

Silence, an ugly dark pit of it, surrounded her as she swept her gaze back and forth for any clue. The house—their stuff and Angie’s belongings—was exactly as Lauren had left it a short time ago. The TV was on and muted. Thomas the Tank Engine filled the screen. Tears blurred her eyes and she sucked in air, realizing she had barely breathed since entering the house.

The scent of peanut butter smacked her. She went to the kitchen sink. “They ate PBJs.” She located two lunch plates with crusts and two almost empty glasses of milk in the sink. Jack touched the milk glass.

“It’s still cold.” He marched over to the TV and paused the DVD. “How long ago did you leave here?”

“About sixty minutes.”

“This has only been running for twenty minutes.”

Lauren’s eyes widened. “Which means that they were here and fine then.”

Jack’s gaze dropped to the floor, his expression darkened, his body tensed. The dogs suddenly pawed at the now-closed back door. Lauren ran the few steps to the door. “That’s how they always greet the boys.”

Jack’s sixth sense screamed. “Wait, Laur—” But she didn’t hear his warning, the dogs’ barking had drowned him out.

Lauren jerked open the door, expecting to see Angie and her sons, totally not registering Jack’s booming for her to stop until it was too late.

Before she could blink, she found herself sandwiched against the wall with Jack plastered to her back. Her trowel clattered to the floor as surprise left her fingers nerveless. His heat and the deadly tension in his hard body were overwhelming. He had his gun in hand. No one was at the door and the dogs barreled out.

“There’re fresh muddy prints on the kitchen mat,” Jack said harshly. “They’re about size twelve men’s shoe. My size, but they’re not mine. So Angie had a welcomed or unwelcomed guest here within the past hour. My guess is unwelcomed and that someone could have been at the door. Opening it could have

been a fatal mistake.” She nodded, gulping for air. He continued, “You have to think before you react and remember EVERYTHING is suspect. The boys could have been outside with Angie and the muddy footprints could mean nothing at all, or the boys and Angie could have been being held at gunpoint. In which case, any edge that I might have had in sneaking around and surprising them from behind would have been lost when you opened the door. So look before you leap, or before you open a door in this case.”

Lauren realized to her core that the world as she’d always known it was gone as effectively as if she had been transported to another planet. She looked at the mat by the sink Jack referred to. “The prints are new. They weren’t there when I left. I know because I swept up cornflakes after Matt dropped the box while climbing up to the top of the pantry. And Angie was not expecting anyone to come over.”

“Then we’ll assume they’re in danger.” Sasha and Sam continued to bark and Jack grabbed her hand, pulling her with him as he slipped to the outside porch and scanned the area, his gun ready. “Stay close. Stay low, and do what I do. The Shepherds might be tracking your sons.” Jack kept to the shadows, knowing how to blend in with the scenery and using that skill like a master.

Sasha and Sam went to a gate three houses away from Angie’s and pawed the wooden privacy fence, begging to get inside.

Jack pulled back into the shadows. “Stay here. Let me check the area first. Whoever made those footprints could have left or could be on the other side of the fence.”

He reached the fence and after checking through the cracks, he put his gun away, and stepped back. He signaled for her.

Lauren rushed up.

“Relax. They’re safe.” Jack motioned for her to go ahead. She almost stumbled as her knees went weak with a relief she couldn’t quite grasp. What did the footprints mean?

Angie, harried and disheveled with her red hair a corky mop in the breeze, opened the gate. The Shepherds bounded inside, nearly knocking her over. She laughed. “You know. When you go on that sex date, we’re going to have to get you a babysitter three days in advance. Otherwise you’re going to be too tired to enjoy anything. These monsters are murder on energy.”

Lauren froze, except for her mouth which opened and shut like a fish out of water.

Angie turned around, gasped then yelled, “Matt. Get down. I told you that you must ask your mom before you can use the diving board.”

“But she’s not here and I want E-hart to fly now.”

At Jack’s barely audible chuckle, Lauren unstuck herself and hurried through the gate, sure her face was beet red. Matt stood on the diving board situated at the deep end of the pool, bouncing with his race car in hand. Mitch had his race car at the shallow end of the pool and was racing it down the stair rail, thoroughly happy to stay within the safe parameters Angie had set.

“Off the diving board now, Matt.” Lauren thanked God that she found her sons safe.

“But, Mom!”

“No buts. You disobeyed Aunt Angie and that means you forfeited your opportunity to use the diving board this time.”

“But...but... MOM!”

“Now. Next time you’ll remember that you can’t just do what want to do without facing the consequences. When Aunt Angie is babysitting you, you have to obey her. Do I need to add another punishment as well?”

Matt shut his mouth and backed off the diving board. He had his jaw set at a stubborn angle though, telling her that he hadn’t come close to learning any sort of lesson. The heat of Jack’s body behind her penetrated her consciousness even before she heard him shut the gate. Both her sons and Angie came to a surprised standstill, their gazes wide.

“Oh my,” Angie said. “Didn’t realize you had company.” Rather than appearing contrite at her sex date remark, she looked entirely too pleased. “I’m Angie Freemont.” She stepped up and offered her hand.

“Jack Hunter.” Jack shook her hand.

“I tried to call, and became really worried.” Lauren said. “Someone ransacked my house at some point since last night.” She again glanced at her sons, so thankful they were safe, but still fully aware they were all in a bad situation. Would they ever be safe again? Danger had parked a vulture on her shoulder that continued to tear at her heart. At the moment the boys were hugging Sasha and Sam and running their race cars down the dogs’ backs.

“My phone took a swim.” Angie waved her hand, drawing Lauren’s attention then narrowed her gaze. “Looks as if you did too, my friend.” She glanced at Jack. “What aren’t you two telling me?”

Lauren looked down at herself and blinked with surprise. She’d forgotten the tear gas, the shower and that she was wet, or damp to be precise—a fact that had likely contributed to her earlier chill. Everything had flown from her mind when she thought Mitch and Matt were in danger.

Jack spoke up. “The ransacking visitor apparently didn’t find what he was looking for and came back for your friend.”

Angie’s face paled and she clasped Lauren’s hand, tightly. “Are you all right?”

Lauren squeezed back. “More than okay. Now.” Matt and Mitch ran up and Lauren let go of Angie’s hand to wrap her sons in her arms. Their blue swimsuits and gray tank tops were damp.

“Are you the police?” Angie questioned Jack sharply, her earlier welcome gone.

“No, but close.”

“Which still needs to be explained.” Lauren gave Jack a suspicious glance as she hugged Matt and Mitch close. She had to let Jack know that she expected some answers, and now that the immediate danger had passed, he needed to start talking.

“You fight bad guys?” Matt demanded, wiggling from Lauren’s too-tight hug.

“My Uncle Jason does,” Mitch added, pulling back from Lauren’s arms and joining Matt in staring up at Jack. “He’s in the army. We’re going to go help him when we grow up.”

“Keeping others safe is an important job to have,” Jack said.

Unable to let go of her sons, Lauren rested her hand on each of their shoulders and reassessed Jack. His easy tone of voice, but still commanding manner as he met the twins at eye-level, man to man, had an interesting effect on her sons. They instantly focused their complete attention on him, their usual fidgeting gone, even their race cars came to a standstill.

“How do I know who is who?” Jack asked.

“Mole on the temple,” Lauren said. “Matt’s is on the left. Mitch’s is on the right.”

Jack’s emotions gripped him hard once he got over the shock of seeing identical twins whom he literally could not tell apart and whose features were very similar to the man he’d killed in Lebanon. Lauren’s boys stared at him with something akin to worship in their gazes. He’d been in their shoes as a boy, looking up at a large man and instinctively knowing that man embodied everything a little boy could dream of becoming. Jack’s own father, career military, had been Jack’s hero.

His gut knotted and his heart twisted. He’d killed their father. He hadn’t had a choice in the matter, would have to make the same decision if he had to do it all over again, but those truths didn’t diminish the emotional impact of what he’d done—nor how it would affect them for the rest of their lives. They were the same age Livy was when Jill moved out. Livy had had nightmares for a while because she missed having her father around. It was the one thing that had prompted Jill to tone down her bitterness. Jack tossed away the memories, but the ache for the boys still ripped him inside.

Intellectually, he had walked himself through the ins and outs of having to take another man’s life in battle. He knew that man was a son, brother, husband or father to someone. He knew that man, be it right or wrong according to Jack’s belief grid, was fighting for a cause, or a reason, just like Jack. Though, he didn’t know if Bill Collins exactly fit that scenario or not. Bill’s dying words didn’t make it seem that way. Still, the emotional impact of taking a life in battle hit Jack harder and more deeply than ever before.

“So do you fight bad guys?” Mitch asked, repeating Matt’s earlier question that Jack had side-stepped.

“Yeah.” Jack’s throat squeezed tight. He wanted to turn around and run the other way. Instead, he forced himself to meet the little guys head on. “My job is to make the bad guys go away.”

“How?” Matt challenged, his face skewing with doubt peppered with morbid curiosity. “Like this?” He pointed his finger mimicking a gun. “Pow.”

“Only if they are trying to kill someone else,” Jack said even though that wasn’t necessarily true anymore. Not since congress stuck their two cents into things, tying a soldier’s hands in warfare, and making life and death second to political correctness. Jack fished in his pocket and held up a quarter for the boys to see. He showed them that his hands were otherwise empty. Then as he spoke he made the quarter disappear with a slight of hand. “We also do other things to stop the bad guys. Being a soldier is a lot of

hard work and practice but it is important work and it starts with you obeying your mom and your Aunt Angie. If you can guess which hand it is in and promise to better obey then you can have the quarter.”

“Pomise,” they said in unison. “We give our solid oak,” Mitch added.

Solid oak? Jack had to ask Lauren about that one. He held out his fisted hands. “Then choose.”

The boys both picked Jack’s right. He opened his hand and there were two quarters sitting in his palm. “Looks like there’s one for each of you.”

The twins squealed in delight, their eyes as wide as saucers as they each picked up a quarter with care, as if the coins themselves were magical.

“Oops, I forgot.” Jack reached behind Mitch’s ear, ruffled the boy’s hair and pulled out another quarter. He handed it to the kid.

Matt twisted his neck around and dug at his right ear. “Do I have one too?”

“Let me see.” Jack fished around Matt’s ear, already seeing himself in the kid’s impatience. “Hmm. Here it is. Must have sneaked to the other side when we weren’t looking.”

Matt laughed and grabbed the coin like a grand prize winner, then turned to Mitch and started a conversation about what they might be able to buy at the dollar store, a conversation that took them in the direction of the pool.

Jack stood and met Lauren’s gaze, which held a stormy mixture of fear, relief, anger, and what he supposed was a healthy suspicion. “I really can’t say what your husband—”

“Ex. Her ex,” Angie said firmly, but in a low tone that wouldn’t carry to the children.

“Ex?” Jack studied Lauren’s expression, realizing that would go a long way to explaining some things.

“In another few days,” she glanced at the boys. “Bill and I have been separated for about eighteen months. Even though you have literally been a life saver today and I don’t know much about Bill’s recent activities, I’m still not willing to talk about anything unless I know who you are and why you’re here. You’re the one who told me to consider everything suspect. Your convenient appearance in the middle of what is happening isn’t coincidence.”

“I don’t know anything about what’s going on here, but I am going to find out,” Jack assured Lauren. He slipped his cell phone from his pocket, wincing at the dozen missed calls. Weston was probably about ready to court marshal him. Jack Googled his commander’s name and pulled up the article on President Anderson’s family on the lit display. He gave Lauren his phone. “Read this. Especially the last two paragraphs.”

She took the phone and Angie moved over to read as well, their expression grew increasingly doubtful. “Your name’s not listed,” Lauren finally said. “Surely you don’t expect me to believe you’re related to the President?”

“No. I’m not, but my commander is his cousin. See, Lt. Col. Roger Weston.” Reaching over, his hand steadying hers, he used his finger to scroll to Weston’s name in the article. Then he pulled up his missed call list, which showed the dozen calls from Roger Weston. “Same guy.” He released Lauren’s hand and stepped back not at all pleased with how much he’d enjoyed touching her.

“Same name.” She arched a skeptical brow.

“Hit the call button. Talk to him. He’s not going to be happy. I left the hospital without being officially released.”

Jack watched as Lauren pressed the button. He heard it ring and braced for what would be coming. Weston’s voice boomed over the line. “Jack! Where in the hell are you? The hospital is all over my ass and there are major problems going down here at Bragg.”

Lauren jumped at the shout. She pulled the phone away from her ear, wincing. Jack couldn’t blame her, even his heart rate kicked up a notch at the anger raging through the phone. Jack took the phone from Lauren and answered his commander. “I’m with Collins’s family. Can’t talk right now, but I’ll get back to you.”

He hung up the phone before Weston could order him back. It was a small thing, but Jack could at least tell himself he may not be where he was supposed to be—a useless hospital bed—but he wasn’t disobeying direct orders either.

He looked at Lauren and her friend and pled his case. “I’m going to check the cars and the area. When I get back, we need to talk. You think about it. All I can say is that if the people after you are the people I suspect your ex was involved with, then you’re in very serious trouble. This isn’t a local situation. This is international. The police aren’t going to know what in the hell to do about it. I’m not even sure I can get the military on board either, because they don’t quite believe me, which is why my commander has his boxers in a wad. But the professional assassin after you tells me I’m right.”

From the look of fear and confusion on both women’s faces, Jack’s words had hit home. They believed him. He’d gotten his urgent point across. Still, he felt like hell as he turned away. He reached the gate, peered through the crack in the privacy fence, then made an about face.

“Time’s up,” he said softly, but deadly serious. “Men in black with guns are in Angie’s backyard. Their alias might be Smith and Jones, but they aren’t the Smith and Jones.”

It wasn’t easy to gauge three acres away through a smattering of overhanging leaves, but he was pretty sure one of the guys was the attacker from Lauren’s house.

This joker had quick resources. Bad news.

Chapter Fifteen

Fayetteville, North Carolina

“Fu-ah-udge.” Roger barely stopped himself from dropping the F-bomb as Jack hung up on him. Every man, woman and kid in the ER waiting room was staring at him, hanging on his every word. Not that he hadn’t already given them an eyeful and earful since following the ambulance to the local trauma center. He’d paced constantly and had asked about Mari’s condition no less than fifty times in the ninety minutes he’d been here. When the EMTs said they were transporting Mari here, Roger didn’t argue. The local hospital was closer than Fort Bragg by about ten minutes and he’d heard some nightmarish tales about the wait at Womack’s ER. He’d rather pay for Mari’s treatment out of his own pocket if it meant she’d be taken care of faster.

“Roger Weston?”

“Here.” He whipped around to see a woman in scrubs. Her dark gaze was sharp and her manner competent.

“I’m Dr. Stewart.” The woman held out her hand. Roger shook it impatiently. “From Bragg? My father’s career Army,” she added.

“Best kind.” Roger nodded. “Is Mari all right?”

“Mari gave her consent for me to speak to you,” the doctor continued. “She is going to be fine, but she has suffered a shock. With a little bed rest and proper nutrition, I think she’ll avoid any complications. I’m recommending she stay here a day or two. She is frightened and wants to talk to you first, though.”

“What about her baby?”

The doctor nodded toward the double doors. “Come with me and I’ll explain what I mean.”

Roger was sure his knees would give out at any second. Every muscle in his body shook like Jell-O on a roller coaster. Each moment since he’d turned Mari over to the EMTs, he’d prayed she’d only need a few stitches, get an all’s-well report, then he’d take her...where?

To her house to be alone?

Another couple’s house where she’d be more apt to feel the loss of Neil that much more?

Or where he really wanted to take her, where he could be reassured at any moment that she was fine. His house.

Damn.

He faced the doctor, calling a halt to their walk. "Don't dress it up. I want straight facts. Is the baby in danger?"

"Yes and no. But let me explain before your mind takes you down the wrong path. Right now she's experiencing some stomach cramps. We're doing more tests, but going on the ultra sound results that everything appears fine. From what I can determine, she's about twelve weeks along. I think her cramping is likely a combination of stress and lack of nutrition. Her last meal was sometime yesterday, she thinks. She's not eating properly, or taking prenatal vitamins. She hasn't seen an obstetrician yet and she needs to. Aside from those concerns, we want to keep an eye on her tonight in case she has any additional swelling around her trachea. Four fingers on her right hand are fractured. We've splinted them. She has a total of twenty-seven stitches to the cuts on her left hand. We've cleaned the glass fragments from her knees. No stitches needed there. She'll have minor scarring, but there's no damage to the underlying muscles or ligaments. From what I hear happened, she's very lucky she wasn't hurt worse."

"Yeah," Roger said, but he didn't see it that way at all. The bastard who did this to Mari was going to pay. "The police need to ask her some questions about what happened. When would you suggest?"

"By tomorrow morning we'll have her test results back and I suspect the cramping she's experiencing will subside. I'd save any major questioning until then, but you can ask her what she'd like to do. Having the guy who attacked her caught sooner may be less stressful for her. Is there someone she knows who can stay with her while she's here? Not that she doesn't have good reason, but she's very nervous. Startles every time the door opens and doesn't do well with any stranger who approaches her. She needs someone who makes her feel safe in order to rest."

"I'll take care of it." Roger searched his mind for an acquaintance that Mari would feel comfortable with and came up short.

"Good. She's in the last room on the left. Let me know if you have any more questions, and I will be in touch as the test results come in."

"Thanks." Roger nodded and hurried down the hall. He reached the door and knocked then eased the door open. "Mari, it's Roger. Can I come in?"

"Yes, please. I am thankful you are still here." Mari sat semi-reclined on the stretcher, swallowed in blankets from the neck down, except her bandaged hands. His towel still covered her hair. Monitors beeped softly. The scent of betadine and alcohol bit at him. An IV hung from a pole dripping fluid and she appeared adrift in deep water.

"I'm not going anywhere. Not until you're safe."

"Is that possible? To really be safe? He stole my purse. He knows who I am. He said he would kill me."

Roger dug in his pocket for Officer Cain's card. A hundred scenarios ran through his mind and none of them were good. "You didn't mention he stole your purse. The police need to know."

"I'm sorry. I was just so upset. That elderly clerk died because of me. I shouldn't have—"

"No, don't you dare put the burden of what happened on your shoulders. You didn't do anything wrong."

Mari startled, her haunted amber eyes widened with surprise, making Roger realize that he'd exploded on her and he winced himself. With as much legitimate guilt torturing him, he couldn't abide Mari blaming herself over this bastard's handiwork.

"Sorry." Roger exhaled harshly. The calm precision and iron control that had paved his way to Lt. Col. through harrowing life and death situations had abandoned him. "The only person responsible is the man who attacked you." He dialed Officer Cain's number. "There's been a development," he said when the officer answered. "They stole her purse, which makes the crazy SOB's threat to hunt her down and kill her that much more serious."

"That would explain it," Officer Cain replied.

"Explain what?"

"The report that just came in. A man driving a red, sixty-seven Chevy registered to a Neil Dalton blew out the windows of Neil Dalton's house with a high-powered shotgun."

"Keep me posted."

"Can she talk about what happened?"

"I'll work on that and call you back. Otherwise not until the morning. Doctor's orders." He hung up the phone and met Mari's frightened gaze. "Remember what I said at the store? For you to think whatever you had to think to make it right, but I was going to help you?"

"Yes." She glanced at her bandaged hands, her voice soft, hesitant.

He sat in the chair beside her bed and stretched out his long legs. "Good. Do it again. Because I'm not leaving you here alone. Not with a madman on the loose. He's going to have to come through me to get to you and that's not going to happen."

Mari exhaled and sank back against her pillows. "Allah has a strange way of answering prayers, but I thank you Mr.—"

"Roger," he said. "Once you've rested and have eaten as much as you can to feed that little tyke inside you then you can tell me more about what happened today."

She nodded, shut her eyes, apparently relieved he wasn't going to press her for answers now. He settled into a comfortable slump and searched his mind for anything Neil might have mentioned about the trauma Mari suffered before. He came up empty. Jack might know—shit!

Roger dug for his phone again. This time he sent Jack a text. Short and to the point. *Call me. Mari is in trouble.* But it would be a while before Jack turned his phone back on.

Chapter Sixteen

Atlanta, Georgia

Before Jack could say another word the boys squealed and shouted, "Mom! Look! Look! Mom!" Sasha and Sam barked excitedly as the boys raced their cars down a ramp they had made with a Styrofoam kickboard.

Jack cut his gaze toward the fence, saw the men in Angie's yard pause then walk toward the noise.

"Damn. They're coming." He turned quickly, assessing the escape options for two women, two kids and two dogs. Not good. He realized he shouldn't have given Lauren time to accept him or embrace her kids. They should have collected everyone and disappeared.

Angie held up a set of keys and pointed to the back door just ahead. "House sitting. Neighbors are gone."

Jack moved fast, sweat pouring and heart pounding as if he were cuffed with a gun to his head. Fear for the kids kicked him hard in the gut. What if his daughter were seconds away from danger? He scooped up the twins, one in each arm. "Quiet. Bad guys are coming," he told the boys. They leaned into his shoulders with their race cars clutched tight. He could feel their shivering as he ran to the back door.

Angie fumbled the lock open, her hands shaking. Lauren and the dogs were on his heels when he slipped inside the house. Locking the door behind them, he made a quick assessment of his surroundings. Staying meant they'd be trapped. He found a key rack in the kitchen, a vehicle in the garage, and within ninety seconds, he backed out to the street in a green mini-van.

Just in case the men in black hadn't caught on yet, he had a golf cap pulled low on his brow and a bag of clubs in the passenger's seat. Lying on the floor behind him were Lauren, her friend and the kids. The dogs were cramped in the back storage area. Even in his wildest imaginings, he never could have cooked up this scenario.

The front yard was empty, but he counted his blessing too soon. The men came leaping over the fence in a hurry. Jack gave up all pretenses and floored the gas pedal. In his rearview mirror, he saw the men chasing after them, pistols with silencers raised. The pavement near the rear tires puffed dust from bullets.

Jack prayed hard and gunned the engine. He flew by Angie's house and then, half a block later, Lauren's car. A black sedan and a police patrol car had pinned her car in. What the hell?

Either it was a stolen or fake cop car, or a cop was hanging out with the wrong crowd. They were likely monitoring all radio transmissions too. If Jack called for help, he might just get Lauren and the kids kidnapped and himself killed.

His car, farther up the road, stood as he left it, which gave him even more ominous information to consider. "Lauren, turn your cell off. I'll explain later."

"Done," she said.

"What's the quickest route to the Interstate?"

"Right at the end of the street." Lauren moved closer to his seat. "Then at the second light go left. You'll see signs for I-85."

"Now get everyone buckled." In his rearview mirror, just before he turned right, Jack saw both the black sedan and the cop car racing toward them. The cop had his lights on but no siren. "This may get rough." His stomach churned at the danger to the kids, but the alternative was even uglier.

"Mom!" Mitch cried, clearly frightened.

Matt's reaction was even more terrifying.

"We're racing like E-hart!" Matt exclaimed. He sat in the rear seat with Angie next to him. "Zoom. Zoom."

Jack clenched his teeth; he'd have to tell the boy never to do what he was doing. He made it to the end of the street and managed to wedge himself in between a Lincoln and a Dodge as he pulled out into the traffic. Then he illegally passed the Lincoln in front of him via a right-hand turn lane.

The cop car kept coming, lights flashing, nearly running over the cars in front of him. The Lincoln and Dodge pulled to the roadside, barely making it between mail boxes and street signs. Jack reached the red light. He could already tell that out-racing these jokers wasn't going to be an acceptable option. They were faster and more reckless considering their heartless endangerment of children and innocent bystanders. Trying to lose them in an adrenaline-pumping high speed chase like in the movies would be stupid. He had to avoid it.

At the light he hung a right instead of a left and made an immediate right into the corner gas station, then disappeared behind the building before the cop made it to the corner. Jack screeched to a halt and the golf clubs in the front passenger seat hit the dash with a hard thwack and clattered to the floorboard.

"Mom?" Mitch cried out again.

"Mitch, don't worry," Lauren said. "I'm here. Just hold onto your seat tight." She was scared too, and the tight emotion in her voice was clear.

The Shepherds whined then barked, worried about their charges.

The pressure of keeping everyone safe was heavier and more intense than he'd ever experienced before in his life. The cop hung a right at the light, just as Jack had. Jack moved around the side of the gas station then.

Delta operatives were trained to operate in chaos. Practically any takedown of an enemy, no matter how precisely planned, was nothing more than controlled chaos. Unexpected elements always appeared. Yet, the crunch of trying to escape in a minivan from two assassins with two dogs, two kids and two women in tow was worse than any mission he'd ever tackled.

"We're okay," Jack reassured the kids. "We're going to outsmart them. Make them disappear like I made the quarter go away." He watched as the black sedan took the right turn on two wheels. Then Jack pulled back into that intersection the moment the light turned green and made a left. The Lincoln he'd passed earlier was once again behind him. He had about sixty seconds before the cop and the sedan figured out his maneuver.

Signs for Interstate 85 appeared, but just past that was a large shopping mall.

Jack weighed the odds and accepted Providence's helping hand. He sailed past the Interstate and turned into the megatropolis mall, going to the far side of the packed parking lot beneath a row of fat pear trees.

Glancing at the cars entering the Interstate, he saw a cop car with flashing lights whizz into the traffic, making cars swerve wildly to get out of his way. No black Sedan followed the cop, which meant that sucker was still close by and looking for them. The men in black probably already had the license number to the mini-van, which meant as long as they were in it, they wouldn't be safe. Six pairs of eyes stared at him from the backseat, four human, two canine and all of them frightened and worried.

He took a bracing breath and set a reassuring smile on his face. His entire focus had shifted in a matter of an hour. Keeping the innocent safe took precedence over unraveling the mystery behind Bill Collins's death.

"What are we doing here?" Lauren leaned forward in the middle seat.

"Shopping," he muttered under his breath, as he shifted in his seat to see her. He hated like hell that he was going to have to steal in front of the kids.

She blinked at him, genuine surprised slacking her jaw. "Shopping?"

"For a car."

"But there isn't a dealership... Oh God." Realization dawned, and it wasn't pretty.

"Better than the high-speed alternative that would put all of you and other folks in danger."

She exhaled. "Okay. I'll take the 'better than' then."

"Reminds me of the *Could Be Worse* books. Right, Matt? Right, Mitch?" Angie asked, clearly trying to distract the boys.

"What books?" Jack asked absently as he scoured the surrounding area for the biggest, most accessible vehicle. Behind him was a carwash and detailing service called CleanSmart with the slogan, "Clean while you shop". The keys for the cars would likely be hanging on an unattended rack near their

business shack. He could steal the Lexus the workers were putting the final buff to, but stuffing everyone in would be rather tricky. The other cars in line to clean were smaller.

“Matt’s favorite bedtime stories,” Lauren said.

“They’re the bestest,” Matt said. “A real grandpa says it all the time.”

Lauren explained. “He says ‘could be worse’ after anything wrong happens.”

“Good philosophy.” Jack continued his search. Beyond the CleanSmart was a collection of tour buses, school buses and retirement center vans with several drivers smoking in the parking lot. One of them wore a tattered cap with Vietnam stamped on it.

“I thought so too, until I heard, ‘could be worse’ every time after the boys got in trouble.”

Jack smiled, thinking Lauren’s position as mother wasn’t much different from his as a Delta team leader. He’d heard something similar to those words many times when dealing with his men. He also had another idea that might avoid grand larceny.

“I’ll be right back.” He opened his car door.

“You’re leaving us here?” Something besides fear laced Lauren’s tight tone and drew Jack’s attention back to her angel face and sinner mouth. He could readily see her worry of the situation, but he also caught a hint of doubt, as if she thought he might abandon them. How Bill Collins could have walked out on her and his two young sons was incompre—

You let Livy go. His conscience slapped him. His divorce from Jill, though welcomed in the face of her infidelities, hadn’t been Jack’s choice. He’d let his wife go and she’d snatched every bit of his daughter away from him that she could. He shoved the searing thoughts aside for now.

“See those buses over there?” He nodded in to the right, his tone strained. “I’m going out in the open. You all are safer here under the trees. You can move to the front seat. If you see our man in the black sedan, hit the panic button on the keys. I will likely see him before you do and be back in seconds, okay?”

“All right.” Lauren unbuckled her seat belt. Jack exited the car and opened the side door for her. He kept a sharp eye on everything happening around them as she transferred to the front. Even so he was still all too aware of her fresh lavender scent and the radiating warmth of her body mere inches from his. Her face was pale, her features drawn with stress and her lush bottom lip was even fuller than before, likely swollen from where she’d worried it between her teeth.

This shouldn’t be happening. The kids should be laughing and playing in the pool. She should be... He axed that thought from his mind. Visions of how to get her relaxed and happy were too damn vivid. After assuring the doors were locked, he left the van, stomping on the gripping need in him to be immediately at their side to protect them. He kept scanning for any sign of a roving black sedan as he crossed to the buses, forcing himself to walk when all he wanted to do was haul ass.

He approached the vet who split off from the group to speak as Jack requested. Jack quickly learned that Stan Brady was a grizzled, five-nine, sharp-as-a-tack gent who’d flown copters in ‘Nam. He still kept

his hair buzzed and his boots to a high shine. A short conversation and a handshake later, the vet pulled in front of the mini-van with a Serenity Village passenger van.

Lauren and Angie both had armed themselves with a golf club during his absence and looked ready to use it when he reappeared. Still, they looked more than relieved to see him. They ushered the kids in to the van and he loaded the dogs. Quick and competent, Stan left the mall area. He noticed the twins' Dale Earnhardt, Jr. race cars and began telling the boys how he got to ride and drive Earnhardt's car. Eyes wide and attention riveted to the man's story, the boys were soon distracted from the upset of the situation. Within five minutes of leaving the mall, Stan's bus driving pals phoned, reporting two men in black had found the mini-van and were canvassing the area. Only then did Jack let himself take a deep breath and ease some of the tension gripping his gut.

They were all safe for the moment but a long way from being out of danger.

Now he needed answers. ASAP. He slid his gaze over Lauren. Her eyes were closed at the moment, as if she were silently praying. She sat in the row of seats behind the driver, Matt on one side, Mitch on the other. She had a hand resting on each of their shoulders, holding the most important people in her world. Kids whose father's actions had likely thrust them into harm's way.

If he hadn't already shot Bill Collins he'd do it now. He sat behind Lauren. Angie was opposite, closest to the motorized doors. The dogs were parked in the center aisle between.

Jack leaned closer and tapped Lauren on the shoulder. "These men know a lot about you. And some of the facts aren't adding up."

She shifted to see him, blue gaze a stormy sea of vulnerability and resolve. She'd go to the ends of the earth for her kids and protect them with her last breath. "What do you mean?"

"They'd blocked your car in. Mine wasn't touched, making me sure we weren't followed from your house. It also indicates they may have the resources to track you via your cell phone signal."

She exhaled sharply. "God. Are you sure?"

"Let's consider I was wrong, and they did follow you to Angie's house today. How did they know which house was Angie's? You didn't park there, and we didn't approach the house from any observable position. I'd keep your cell phone turned off. Use mine for any calls you need to make. And I wouldn't leave any sort of electronic trail either. No credit cards, ATM's, et cetera."

"I see what you mean. Either they already knew Angie's my friend and I'd stayed there last night or they tracked me somehow."

"We can't forget about the muddy prints in Angie's kitchen."

"If the men in black arrived after us then whose footprints are they?"

"Good question." He looked over at Angie, sitting across from them. "The back door was left open. Do you know for sure that you had shut it?"

Angie rolled her eyes. “With Matt and Mitch leading the posse, I don’t think there can be a for sure, but I thought I had.” She shivered. “You can bet from now on the door gets locked and I’m getting a security system.”

“Buy a big dog instead,” Lauren advised. “The elaborate system Bill had his buddy Conrad install wasn’t worth a fig. They disabled it.”

“I think I hear a Great Dane or a Mastiff calling my name,” Angie said.

“So who left the footprints in the kitchen if the men hadn’t arrived yet?” Lauren frowned.

“Good question,” Jack said.

“You said Bill was involved in something. What and who?”

“I’m not sure yet, so it’s best if I keep that to myself right now.”

“That’s not an answer I can accept.” Lauren shook her head. “You want me to trust you enough to talk. Keeping things from me will make that impossible.”

Jack nodded, expecting that from her, but somehow still feeling a twinge of what would never be. “I understand.” Aside from the fact that he’d killed her husband, the father of her kids, his job was nothing but secrets. Something Jill couldn’t tolerate. “For right now, Lauren, just think global and radical, and as soon as I can say more, I will. You can’t go back to Angie’s and you can’t go home. I wouldn’t contact anyone you know until we can get a handle on who is after you and why.”

“How are we supposed to figure out who they are?”

“First, you and I are going to talk and see if any of the pieces fit the puzzle. Second, you can help me get into Bill’s life. He had to live somewhere. He had friends, an office, any person or place where we might find clues to what he was involved in. I don’t think I have to tell you just how serious this is. Just how much of a life and death situation this is turning into.”

“No. You don’t.”

“I suggest we stay at a hotel until we can sort this out.”

“I still don’t know you.”

“No worries, Laur. I’m staying with you. We can drop Sasha and Sam off at my mother’s house and camp out at the Ritz for a few days,” Angie spoke up, making Jack blink with surprise, something that didn’t happen often.

“The Ritz?” He mentally calculated what two rooms would cost per night for who knew how long. He had money in his account but that could eventually stretch his limit.

Anyone ever hear of Motel Six?

Chapter Seventeen

Atlanta, Georgia

1800 hours

Conrad Garner drove slowly past the elaborate stone and fountain entrance to the St. John's Country Club. He only dared to make one pass and tried to absorb as many details as possible—motorized heavy-iron gates, alarm system, video cams and a cop-wanna-be in the guardhouse. He would be a problem, a witness Conrad couldn't afford to have.

He continued around the ten-foot stone-walled perimeter, noting any changes and weaknesses in security system as the forested areas grew denser the closer he came to the Chattahoochee River. At the service entrance to the world class golf course, he found no guard, but a card key gate and standard video surveillance. Passable if he wanted to go to the effort. So would entering via the river side, but he had a better idea.

Edward Weiss had taken the silver spoon he'd been born sucking and had turned it into solid gold in Atlanta's real estate market. He lived in high style. Spent most of his time playing golf or traveling and showed up at the office every now and then to close on the multi-million dollar deals his assistants put together. Edward constantly claimed that he'd made more real estate deals doing eighteen holes than most executives did by hours in boardrooms. He had a trophy wife with Pamela Anderson implants who spent her time either in the spa or shopping, two daughters off at boarding school, and not a care in the world. The bastard had it all.

Why in the hell had Bill even bothered to cut Edward in on the five million? Why hadn't Bill realized that he, Conrad, needed it more than all of the others in the group all together?

Growing more pissed by the minute, he checked his cell phone again. Not a peep from any of the guys.

Which meant one thing. They had cut him out of the picture so they could have all the money for themselves. Were they behind either of the men at Collins's house? Did they now have Lauren's letter from Bill? If they did, then they had three of the six clues. He only had two.

His teeth ached from the pressure of his anger.

They didn't need the money. They went on international golfing trips. Dined in uppity restaurants and camped out at five star hotels. In fact, now that he really thought about it, the whole Vegas tradition, being one of the guys and all that stuff was nothing more than a pity fuck for good old Con.

Poor Con, he would have been NFL's first pick if he hadn't have blown his knee so bad.

You would have been great!

Better than the best.

Tough luck.

His ears rang from the sympathies.

Not wanting a traceable electronic trail, Conrad paid cash at a nearby pro golf shop then made his way back to the St. John's Golf Course. He looked like the ultimate leisurely golfer, cap, khaki's, pullover, shoes, gloves, the works. He parked about a mile away in a shopping area and strolled at a leisurely pace. Conrad knew for a fact that the forested acres edging the perimeter of the course relied on wireless video cameras. For Edward, it had been the one negative aspect of buying a house on the golf course. Years ago he'd laughed about his paranoia over some psycho getting into the community.

Conrad chuckled, thinking it apropos that he'd be the one proving Edward was right all of these years later. Within ten yards of a particularly shaded area of the high stone fence, Conrad turned on his wireless jamming device guaranteed to send WiFi, Bluetooth and video feed on the fritz in a twenty meter radius for as long as he wanted. He'd be a roving blackout for the security cameras. Getting over the wall wasn't as much of a breeze as Conrad first thought. His bum knee gave out on him and started aching like an SOB.

First, he found a stray ball. Next he pilfered a golf club from a cart parked near the trees with the owners absorbed by a ball in the sand. Then he made his way to the back of Edward's house. Finding no one at home, he disabled the security system that he'd sold to Edward long ago and slipped into the basement with a strategic stroke of the club that sent the golf ball through the glass French doors.

As he made his way inside, he wondered why he'd never thought of doing this before—breaking into places he'd armed. He could have easily picked up some extra cash over the years. A little redistribution of wealth from the haves to the have-nots. Not stealing really. Just skipping the government middleman was all and avoiding the bureaucratic waste Edward always complained about.

He found the hot water heater on low, which told him that Edward and his wife were slumming-it in some ultra resort. Of all the piss poor luck. He doubted there was a chance in hell he'd find the mail for the past few days upstairs but it would be worth a look.

He entered the main part of the house via the kitchen and the "servant's stairs"—hallways that kids, hired help (usually illegal), and rare pets were allowed to tread upon. Every inch of the place was decorated to a posh museum-like T that made Conrad itch to either smash it or get outside so he could breathe. He found no mail but the calendar on the refrigerator door sang a sweet song for him.

Edward's flight was due back at seven this evening. Conrad had plenty of time to fix himself a meal then get ready for his pal. Five million was at stake.

A little while later, all cozy in his hiding place, Conrad watched Edward walk into the kitchen from the garage area. Edward wore a casual sports coat, khakis and a tie. His hair, always on the thin side, had

become sparser over the years. Gray rode high on his temples, and a healthy tan shined any developing bald spots. He hummed some offbeat tune as he set his briefcase and a box of mail on the counter. Then his cell phone rang.

“Ray. You dog. Bob and I will never forgive you for ditching us. Pebble Beach dragged without you. How was the yacht? What? You’re still cruising.” Edward whistled. “Nice. Yeah, I got the same message from Thomas. Don’t know what letter he’s talking about or why he sounded so grave. I just picked up a mountain of mail, but haven’t been through it yet. Hmm. I tried calling him too. He didn’t pick up.” Edward sighed. “No. I haven’t spoken to Con, either. Did something about him seem odd to you in Vegas?” Edward dug through the mail and pulled up a FedEx envelope.

Conrad’s mouth watered and his heart hammered.

Edward laughed. “He’s always been crude, but good for a laugh or two every now and then. Sort of a Fred Flintstone/Andrew Dice Clay wanna be. This time though, he was as touchy as a live wire after that blond with the jumbo tits dropped him. Shit, we were just joking about him taking Viagra with the Viva Viagra toast. What? You dog! You nailed her in the bathroom while we were at the table? Damn. Just damn. No wonder she dropped Con flat. I’m envious. Hey, I’ve got Bill’s letter in hand. Let me take a piss, I’ll read it and call you back. Better not soak up all of the sun while you’re out there. Save some for us poor bastards who still have to work for a living. I’m closing a mega-deal tomorrow. Talk to you in a sec.”

Edward hung up the phone. With Bill’s letter in hand, he turned from the counter. Conrad was waiting for him.

“Fore!” Conrad yelled as he slammed the five-iron against the side of Edward’s head. Edward screamed. Bill’s letter dropped to the floor, bone cracked, blood splattered, the scent of urine filled the air and Conrad’s pent up rage found a sweet release as he stroked a round of golf bar none.

Chapter Eighteen

Pizza and chaos Chuck E. Cheese style reigned. Lauren had left Sasha and Sam at Angie's mother's house. Mitch and Matt were wreaking havoc in the play area after scraping the cheese off their pizza and declaring to save the rest for later. Their abandoned cups and plates scattered the table. Their Dale Earnhardt, Jr. cars, which had been practically glued to their hands since Bill sent them, were being raced over every conceivable surface in the restaurant. Angie followed them around like the dedicated, indulgent godmother she was. The boys no longer wore their damp bathing suits and tank tops, but sported sneakers, jeans and different colored T-shirts—so Jack could tell them apart. A trip to Walmart on Jack's dime had provided essentials for everyone for the next few days, plus a computer and ammunition—lots of it. Jack insisted on Lauren not using her credit, debit or ATM cards, concerned that any electronic transaction would pinpoint her location.

Lauren shuddered, finding it surreal to be in the situation she was in while other lives marched normally on.

Jack was another element in that unreal world she found herself struggling to comprehend. She didn't know what to make of him and she didn't know what to make of her reaction to him either. Right now he had his intense gaze focused on her. His sharp question ripped at her, bringing up painful memories. Not that she was still hung up on Bill, but because the past mattered and she found the mistakes she'd made hard to face.

"So you're saying Bill began acting strangely two years ago, after accepting a job with BioLogics, an international company that does what exactly?"

"I can't tell you exactly. All I know is they develop green technology. Bill refused to tell me anything more. His job became a major point of contention between us. He had to travel frequently and wasn't allowed to disclose where he was going due to company policy." She paused, needing a moment to gather herself from the memories. "I wanted to know what about his job required him to keep secrets. He always said that it had to do with the revolutionary, energy saving projects BioLogics was assisting in the development of and no one could know where their research facility was until the product was ready for public scrutiny."

"Odd."

"I thought so. Our marriage deteriorated, maybe it had already been on the rocks, but I was so absorbed in assuring that Matt and Mitch were on the right developmental track that I didn't realize it. They

were born very premature and until recently were behind. Anyway, when other women entered the picture months later, I reached the end of the line. I concluded he'd used his job as an excuse to jet-set with bimbos and made up that cloak and dagger scenario to keep his adultery secret."

"He was a fool." Jack's voice was rough with anger and his green eyes flashed unadulterated heat—a mixture of outrage and frank male interest that he didn't try to hide. "You deserve better." He nodded toward the boys. "They deserve better."

Lauren bit her lip as warmth tingled over her nerves and centered in her breast. She knew that truth in her mind, it had been reinforced by close female friends, but to hear it with such forceful conviction from this man bore a hole right through an underlying layer of *what's wrong with me* doubt she had to constantly fight.

"What exactly did he do for BioLogics?" Jack asked after clearing his throat.

Lauren set her mind back to facts, leaving behind her roiling emotions. "That's even more puzzling. He was hired to be their PR person. If the company is so secret he couldn't tell me where it is, then why would they need a public relations expert? I asked Bill that."

"What did he say?"

"That the company would be so big once their product hit the market they would need an army of PR people to cover the globe. Bill's job was to put everything in place so it would be smooth sailing when the product was launched."

"Do you know when he left the States this last time?"

Lauren frowned, counting back the days. "The fourteenth of July. It was kind of sudden. He was scheduled to see the boys and canceled."

Jack's eyes narrowed and she could practically see his mind latch onto something significant.

"What?" she asked. "Does that mean something?"

"Maybe. What about his friends, business associates?"

"He has some college pals he goes to Vegas with every year. His office secretary. His accountant. Then there's his current flavor of the month, a Brazilian model." All the events since the boys' birthday party ran through her mind and she pressed her palms to her eyes, almost overwhelmed. "She might be a resource, but when Angie spoke to her the woman didn't know where Bill was. She doesn't know about his death. I've only told Angie. Nobody else. Right now I'm waiting for them to find Jack's body, so I—"

"What? Explain."

Lauren went through her conversations with the embassy in Sao Paulo, watching Jack's expression become more and more taut with irritation and determination, maybe? She didn't know. She had a hard time settling on what emotion fueled his grim look.

Driven to know more, Lauren set her hand over his fist. "Now, tell me what you know."

He twisted his wrist and clasped her hand in his, but none of the heated warmth of his skin and the anchoring strength of his grip helped her absorb what he said next.

“Two weeks ago I saw Bill Collins in Lebanon actively participating in a terrorist act with a radical group. I believe they’re behind what is happening to you now.”

The blood rushed from Lauren’s head and dizziness had her reeling in her seat. An icy chill gripped her from head to toe. “I...oh...my...God. You’re saying...a terrorist? Like a 9/11 bomber? When you said radical group, I pictured green-loving environmentalists lying prostrate before bulldozers. But what you’re saying is that Bill was involved in...that he committed treason?”

“I’m sorry. Every man is innocent until proven guilty, but—”

“You saw what?” She pulled her hand from Jack’s and he let her go, looking as if what he had to say was as painful for him as it was for her. She pressed her fingers to her numb mouth, searching for the words she needed to speak. “What did he do?”

Jack exhaled harshly. “That I can’t tell you.”

She studied him a moment, once again taking in his capable bearing, his fresh scars and suddenly another piece of the puzzle behind why Jack had come to her fell into place. “He played a part in what happened to you, right? Whatever he was involved in was responsible for putting you in the hospital.”

“Indirectly, yes. But that’s not important. What I need to find out, what I need to know, is why he was there and who he was involved with. The fact that his body is missing is very significant.”

“Before you appeared at my door, I wondered if Bill had faked his death because he’d gotten himself into some serious trouble. It’s part of the reason I haven’t told anyone yet.”

“No.” Jack met her gaze head on and let her see just how deadly serious he was. “You don’t have to wonder. I saw Bill die.”

Lauren shook her head as she shifted back in her seat, putting more distance between her and Jack. Her mind was too punch-drunk to even calculate if it was possible time-wise. “You were in Sao Paulo last night?”

“No. I was in DC in Walter Reed Medical Center last night.”

“Then what are you saying?”

Jack started his sentence three times before he finally said it. “I saw him die two weeks ago in Lebanon, then his body disappeared.”

She gripped the table edge until her nails ached. “You’re serious.”

“Yes. Is there anything you can tell me that might explain why he was there?”

“No.” Lauren exhaled hard, a harsh, bitter sound escaped from her. “But he has a condo downtown. Had it before we married. I have a key.”

“We’ll go tonight, okay?”

She followed his glance toward the play area. Her sons were racing toward the table, happy and excited, without a clue to their father's crimes. "Yes."

"I win! I win!" Matt shouted as he zoomed his race car over the food littered table top.

Mitch came up behind him, trying to push his brother aside. "No fair! I called yellow flag! I tripped. You didn't win!"

"Yes, I did! Yellow flags are for crashes. You didn't crash!"

"Yes, I did too crash," Mitch cried, tears springing into his eyes.

Before Lauren could get a word in, Matt pushed Mitch. The table rocked and all of the drinks tipped over, pouring Jack's way. Lauren braced herself for Jack's irritation, already hearing Bill grumble about how little control she had over the children. She jumped up, searching for napkins, but Jack was faster than lightning. Not only had he removed his lower half out of harm's way, but he managed to stop the flood by tipping over the napkin dispenser and using it as a large sponge.

"Whoa!" Jack reached out and steadied the table as the boys kept scuffling. "The problem is neither of you can honestly race each other yet." Jack caught their attention. Lauren had reached the end of her rope. She was amazed at Jack's calm control and easy manner. He took the boys in stride and guided them in a positive direction, easing the tension and chaos rather than adding to it.

Matt and Mitch frowned, glanced suspiciously at each other and then looked outraged at Jack, clearly upset.

"Why not?" Mitch demanded.

"Why not, *sir*?" Lauren prompted.

"Sir," the boys both said together.

Jack was undaunted. "First, you can't have an official race unless you have a judge for it. Second of all, I bet you didn't even set up a predetermined course."

Mitch frowned so hard that Lauren's brow ached. "What's that?"

Angie arrived, carrying Mitch's shoe. "You lost this when you crashed, kid."

Her remark set off another argument between Matt and Mitch over the legitimacy of Matt's win.

"Between the birthday yesterday and the excitement today, you two are over-tired and need to go to bed a little early tonight."

"Mom!" they cried together.

"That chimp is behaving better than you boys at the moment." Angie pointed to the big screen TV. Everyone looked toward the CNN broadcast.

Unable to quite hear what was being said, Lauren read the typed feed scrolling up the screen. "Due to the destruction of the world's oil market, Andreas Miles, owner of GreenWorld Corporation, announces his company will go to the ends of the earth in order to put their revolutionary new biofuel, GXP, on the market sooner than planned."

“He has the chimp dressed exactly the same way as he’s dressed,” Lauren said.

“I know, sort of weird isn’t it?” Angie said. “A friend of my mother’s, Candace Latimoor from the CNN show *Latimoor Live*, is doing a live tour of GreenWorld’s research and production facility in Peru later this week. She says he’s a real nutcase when it comes to the chimp. Treats him just like a son. Probably even better than.”

“GreenWorld?” Lauren frowned. “I’ve heard that name before.”

“Where?” Jack turned, studying her, his gaze sharp.

“I don’t know.” She rubbed her temple. Looking back up at the screen, the man and the chimp were gone, replaced by pictures of what people were now calling the Hell Zones, the burning out-of-control oil fields, reservoirs and refineries in the Middle East and the remnants from last week’s attacks in the US. “Everything is running together and I can’t think.”

“I know what you mean,” Jack said. “The past two weeks have been like that for me.”

Lauren nodded. Somehow as bad as things were, it would be worse were it not for Jack.

Two hours later, Angie babysat the boys at a hotel where Jack paid cash for adjoining rooms under a false name and Lauren led Jack into Bill’s upscale condo. Located in downtown Atlanta in a premium community of shops, restaurants and office buildings, the third floor rooms overlooked a park. With a housekeeper three-hundred-and-sixty-three days a year, Bill kept everything looking like a showcase.

Lauren couldn’t breathe, a combination of too many emotions bombarding her all at once, shock from the intruding violence, and Jack’s growing presence. The longer she was with him, the more aware of him she became.

But how could she not? He’d been a human shield for her and everything she held dear. She could also be over-reacting as well. She paused in her search through Bill’s mail the housekeeper collected each day. Her nerves were on super alert, amplifying everything. The muffled clank from the upstairs tenet had made her jump. Jack opening drawer after drawer had her on edge, worried over what other secrets Bill harbored. A siren speeding by on the street outside had made her heart race. They were all normal sounds, but her responses kept escalating, clawing at her spine, eating at her mind. At every turn she expected a bullet to be waiting for her.

Memories of when she first met Bill were strongest at the condo and they’d collided with the facts she’d learned today the moment she’d walked into the door, turning her life into a train wreck.

Who she thought her husband was had suddenly twisted into an unrecognizable mass of deceit. As if she had gone to bed with a dashing prince and woke up with something worse than a toad, she’d awoken to a horrible devil—a terrorist.

The implications and repercussions of it all were just now bubbling into her shocked brain and her stomach churned with questions. Would people think she was involved in Bill’s treason? Isn’t that what

citizens who acted against the United States were charged with? Would her family be reviled? Would her children be outcasts? Were their lives destroyed?

It was more than she could absorb.

A terrorist.

She just couldn't believe it. Still didn't believe it."

"Hey." Jack touched her arm and made her shiver, making her even more aware. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Her voice was thick with emotion.

He studied her a moment. "Bad memories?"

"And worried about what you said and just how devastating it will be to our lives."

"No one stops to consider the collateral damage their actions can cause. I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you and the boys as insulated as I can from what Bill did."

She studied Jack a moment and knew he meant what he said. That she could rely on his word more than any man she'd known other than her brother. There was a solid strength to him that went deeper than his physical presence. It was an essence of something different about him, something stable and good. Maybe it stemmed from the code that he'd committed to live his life by in serving his country. She tried again to draw a deep breath, but couldn't. Not because of fear this time, and not because Jack's reassuring words didn't help, but because they did. They reached inside her and stirred emotions she didn't want to feel. Surely, she'd lost her mind. She'd just met this guy and there was no way she could really *know* those things about him. Right?

"Listen to this," Jack held up a wireless phone and pressed a button. Several recorded messages played. Two from friend's asking Bill to call them. The last was from his Brazilian squeeze, it was a voice and accent Lauren would never forget. "Please, I know you say to only call here for emergency. But I so worry. I sent everything as you asked today. To friends. To family. Now please be okay. Call me."

"Bill's latest. She lives in Sao Paulo. Angie spoke to her yesterday. Bill's a week late for their date."

"She left the message five days ago. I also found this brochure in Bill's office. It's about a Brazilian wildlife preserve. It just seemed out of place with the high end golf resorts and spas and it could have some connection to BioLogics."

"Good thinking." She looked down at the mail in her hand. "Brazil...sent everything...Oh My God! Bill's letter!" She dropped the mail and dug into her back pocket to pull out the letter. "It must have been delivered with the boys' birthday presents yesterday. They came from Sao Paulo. In their excitement, the boys had likely knocked it into the bushes I found it in this afternoon."

"And you haven't opened it, yet?"

"It's not like nothing else has been going on. And, to be honest I almost ripped it up and threw it away." She held up the letter. "He wrote My Dear Lauren on the envelope. And I..." She paused. "Didn't want to read it after that. After all of his indiscretions, after all of the pain he's caused, after all of the

disrespect, those words pissed me off so much that I didn't want to hear anything he had to say. Even if—" her breath hitched, "—even if he was dead. I'm awful. That's awful, but that's just the way it is."

"No," he said without a trace of condemnation. He stepped closer to her, brushing his thumb along her jaw. Every inch of his rough-edged nearness grabbed her attention and made her want to be closer to him, despite the chaos inside her. He was a rock solid port in a storm, an attractive port that appealed to her on a base level, for sure. But there was more to it than animal attraction and her own starved state. She was drawn as much to that element of honor she sensed in him as she was to everything else. She breathed in his enticing scent and drank of the determined warmth of his appreciative gaze. With her world reeling, he was an anchor she couldn't resist.

"Not awful," he said. "While you were getting the boys ready for bed, I did some internet searching on BioLogics and Bill. The pictures of him with other women pissed me off." His intense gaze darkened and his jaw set to a rock hard angle that she'd hate to meet in a dark alley. He moved his hand to cup her chin. "So, no. You're not awful at all. But him doing that while married to you made him the biggest idiot in the world."

His touch stirred her even more and his anger comforted. She nodded. It had been so long since she'd been touched or comforted that she wanted to lean into his hand to feel more of him, but stepped back instead and opened the letter.

My Dear Lauren,

Considering the way things are at the moment, I know this letter will come as a surprise. But I have to let you know that I still love and miss you very much. Our times together have meant everything to me and I'd love to give you all of the riches in the world. Your share is only the beginning. Just remember how happy we were in Paris, our visit to the Coliseum in Rome and the kiss we shared despite our "suspicious minds" this "July". NBT if you can believe it. The trip was just like our love me tender honeymoon in "blue Hawaii".

I know you are looking forward to our trip to Vegas with the gang. Everyone will have a piece of the action to win the "Grand Jackpot". Yahoo! "Viva Las Vegas!"

Please don't stop loving me. You know all there is to know and you are the key to everything.

Love, Bill.

With every word she read her heart pounded harder and her anger shifted to something darker as outrage sent a sharp pain ripping through her gut—not her heart. His infidelities had killed whatever part he had there. She'd thought she was over all that. Over the hurt. Over the tears. Her hands shook as she crumpled the letter. Tears stung her eyes.

"What's wrong? Can I read it?"

"It's...Dear God...it's...*everything* is wrong with it." She reached deep and steadied her insides. "Yes, you can read it. It's nothing but a huge pile of bullshit."

Surprisingly, he grinned as he slid Bill's letter from her numb fingers. "Having grown up where cow patties were a menace, I can appreciate the adjective. Not just a pile, but a *huge* pile." She could tell he was deliberately searching for a way to shift her from the shadows pulling at her and she latched onto his levity, blinking back her tears. It was a lifeline.

"Where was that?" she asked, realizing that her own farm roots had exposed themselves. Bill would have been appalled.

"Kentucky. Bluegrass, prime horses and sweet tea. You?"

"Georgia. Peaches, grits and even sweeter tea."

"So tell me what's up with the letter," he asked as he opened the crumpled paper and looked over it.

"He's playing some sort of sick game. How dare he tell me how much he still loves me and how much he misses me! He's also totally delusional. He's fabricating memories that never happened. We've never been to Paris nor "to the Coliseum in Rome" or had a "kiss we shared despite our suspicious minds this July." And what does "NBT, if you can believe it" mean?" She fisted her hands and paced across the plush floor. "Bill and I honeymooned in Bermuda, not Hawaii. Perhaps he mixed me up with one of his bimbos. I've never been to Vegas with him and his buddies, so why would he say I'm looking forward to going with him and his buddies? Bill would have never been caught dead using either of those expressions. And this last part makes me want to scream. Where does he get off asking me to please don't stop loving him?"

She blinked at the burn of more tears and turned away from Jack, embarrassed.

Jack clasped her shoulders and turned her to face him. A fierceness had sharpened his chiseled features. His green eyes burned. "Bill Collins was a fool and completely unworthy of anything to do with you. Don't waste any more of yourself on his stupidity." He slid his thumb along her bottom lip, sending fiery need right to her core. Her stomach clenched and her body wept for more. "Another time, another place, I'd back you to that wall right there, or any place you wanted to go, and do everything in my power to wipe him from your mind."

His voice was deep and rough, giving her a good idea of what he'd sound like in the bedroom. She tingled. Something inside her loosened and flared hot, making every erogenous zone she possessed jump to attention. *Do it*. The words rang in her mind. A directive to her. A command to him. Let him do it. Right here. Right now. Toss everything you know and believe about yourself and take Jack up on his offer to forget about Bill.

What did it matter that she'd known Jack less than a day? She had no doubt he was capable of fulfilling his promise to wipe Bill out of her mind. In some ways he'd already done that. She was more aware of Jack on a sensual level than she'd ever been of Bill.

Jack demanded it. He was so much more primal, so much nobler, so much more everything. He had flung open a sexual door between them so hard and fast that she could still hear the echo of his enticing promise slamming against her. *I'd back you to that wall right there, or any place you wanted to go, and do everything in my power to wipe him from your mind.*

She opened her mouth, ready to cross the threshold. But before she could say “do it”, he turned away from her.

“Let me amend that statement,” he said. “Were I a better man than Bill and we were in another time and place, I’d do that.”

She didn’t get the chance to reply because she heard a key turning in the lock to Bill’s condo.

Chapter Nineteen

Jack heard the lock tumble open and moved fast. He snuffed the lights and palmed his P226 as he pocketed Bill's letter. Grabbing Lauren's hand, he led her to the master bedroom before the men entering could have possibly seen or heard them. But then one of the men was speaking so loudly, he and Lauren could have been elephants. Making his way through the condo was easy. The upscale décor was very Zen in style, almost sterile, and left very little clutter to bump into in the dark, letting him focus on the intruders' conversation.

"I've never had to open a tenant's door for the police before. Are you sure you have the right man, Officer? Bill Collins is an affluent business man and his wife does a lot of charity work for children."

"As I said, we suspect his involvement in a crime we are investigating. But right now we are just worried about locating him. We think something may have happened to him. When did you last see him?"

"I'm not sure. A week, maybe two. He travels a lot for his job so that isn't unusual. Have you checked with his wife? I know they're estranged but she might know something. Might have even spoken to him."

"We've tried, but haven't been able to our hands on her, yet."

Jack not only saw red at the man's choice of words, but he itched to smash the guy's face.

"I'll be a few minutes looking around. Do you want me to stop by your unit when I'm done?"

"I'll just wait on you. Without Collins here, it seems the right thing to do. What are you looking for? I watch CSI. Maybe I can help."

"No. Just have a seat."

Footsteps then the sound of cabinets and drawers opening followed.

Lauren tensed and Jack pulled her body tight to his as he unlatched the balcony door. His heart hammered and it had nothing to do with the men down the hallway or the danger of their situation and everything to do with the woman against him. Her lavender scent, her softness, and whatever the pheromone else they called it these days, his attraction to her was visceral.

Jack slid the balcony door open and eased them out into the night. He inched the door shut behind him as he scanned the area. They were three stories up on a twenty story building. The fire escape flanking the right side of the balcony was a welcomed sight. Before being injured in Lebanon, he could have scaled the three stories to the ground in a heartbeat, but now it would take him longer, and guiding Lauren along would have been rough.

The slight chill to the night gave the air a biting edge and the urban noise teeming from the surrounding city pulsed with excitement. Cities had energy and Atlanta's came with a bit of a southern flare to it. They had exited to the side of the building and were hidden from the street as well as from observers by a larger condo on the side.

"Stay close and make as little noise as possible." He led the way down to the second floor where the stairs ended. To go farther would mean unlatching and lowering an old iron ladder, which would likely wake the dead with its screeching.

"Jump when I ask." Jack went over the side of the rail and a thud echoed as his feet hit the pavement. The slim alley way was empty. Their escape had been pretty anticlimactic when compared to the day and a welcomed relief for Jack. All he had to do was keep away from the front of the building by leading her to the car via the back alley.

"Okay jump." He held out his arms.

She looked down at him, her expression horrified. She hesitated. Geez, it wasn't all that much higher than climbing a tree. "Come on."

She shook her head, but then the sound of men's voices overhead had her climbing over the railing and letting go. He caught her easily then took his time setting her on her feet. She clung to him, her heart racing hard. "Are you afraid of heights?"

"Afraid would be an understatement." She shivered hard and he had to fight the urge to kiss her before he let her go. The voices had come from an upper floor and not Bill's condo, but they still needed to get off the street. Taking her hand, he headed back to the car they'd left in a public parking lot a block away. The contact with her soft skin only amplified his want of her. All he kept seeing was the look in her eyes when he'd told her what he would do to wipe Bill from her mind. That look had him wondering what would have happened if they hadn't been interrupted.

Oh man. He sucked in air at the thought of letting go with her—a visual of him and her naked, enjoying a full sexual feast flashed before his eyes. Not that she wasn't attractive to him on every level, but hell, something about her stroked his primal side but good. Which had him wondering what in the hell was wrong with him? Not that he shouldn't find her attractive. Not that he shouldn't want her with some urgency. He'd been without for a long while. It was the strength and depth of that want that were out of proportion and weren't held back in the least by all the reasons he should avoid her like the plague. She was the widow of a terrorist he was investigating. He should be focused on protecting her ass and not holding it. And most of all, he'd killed her husband and had yet to tell her that. He needed to get his mind back on his mission. Period. He bolstered his strength and control and quickened his pace.

"I need the fake cop's license plate." He led her to the car, determined to ignore the burn inside him. "And he might not have come alone. Our shooter could be in a car nearby or on the street. I want you to drive to the Varsity down the street and wait for me, okay? I won't be long."

Letting her go off into the night would bite, but would be safer than with him. She'd be okay for ten minutes in the restaurant's parking lot. There had been a number of cars parked both in the parking lot and at the old-fashioned drive-in stations. Besides, he needed a breather to clear his head. Alone with Lauren was not a good situation and he thanked God her friend and sons were waiting back at the hotel.

"I don't like the idea of separating. What are you going to do?" Matching the hurried pace he'd set, she still managed to gaze at him, clearly worried. He bit back a smile. Considering the depth of danger he operated in on a regular basis, he literally was just going to walk down the street. Her reaction was amusing and touching.

"Depends on what I find. Mainly just get close enough to read his license plates. There's a real good chance I won't be recognized, but they'll make you in a heartbeat."

"Just be careful. Okay?"

"Always." That was one rule he lived by and drilled every day into the men under him. It took a certain breed of man to be in special ops, a man willing to go that extra hundred miles without question, a man willing to lay everything on the line at all times, but that didn't mean to kiss off caution. If anything it meant the opposite. A dead soldier did nobody any good. And a half-cocked one endangered everyone.

They reached the car and Jack waited until she had taken off before he left on foot. He found the cop's car parked on the street and as he suspected, he spied another man in the unloading zone up ahead, leaning on a black sedan. It was the same make and model as the one that had chased them from Angie's. The guy, same size and build as their shooter, smoked a cigarette and kept looking at the entrance to Bill's condo.

Jack thought about sneaking up behind the SOB and putting him in the hospital for a good long while and would have if Lauren and her kids were tucked safely away and he had a back up to take care of them if things went wrong. As it was, he couldn't take the chance. He was smart enough to know that no matter how confident and proficient he was at hand-to-hand combat, anything could go wrong. He'd get the guy. Soon. Just not yet.

He jotted the numbers to both license plates down on the back of Bill's letter and met Lauren at the Varsity. Once they were back on the Interstate, he handed her Bill's letter. "Take another look at this. I think he may have sent you a coded message."

Turning on the map light, she re-read the letter. "I honestly don't have a clue as to what he's trying to tell me. The only thing that I can make a remote guess at is what he wrote about Vegas. About me going with him and his buddies. Maybe I'm supposed to contact them, or meet them."

"That would be my guess. Maybe Bill sent them letters too. The woman on the phone said she'd sent what Bill had asked. Sent it to his family and friends."

"That's right. She said that. I missed that detail."

"Tell me about them."

"I don't know a lot. I've only met them and some of the wives a couple of times. Bill kept me and the kids out of that loop. Maybe we embarrassed him or something. I don't know why."

Jack bit down on his temper as Lauren gave him a few sketchy facts about Thomas Ettinger, Edward Weiss, Conrad Gardner, Bob Cantrell and Ray Branson.

"We'll pay Thomas and Edward a surprise visit tomorrow and hopefully make more progress," he told Lauren. "There wasn't much information in the condo. I've rarely met someone who possessed practically no personal belongings. For that place to be his principle residence, the condo was like a museum. I imagine the fake cop won't find much either."

"You think he's impersonating a law officer?"

"Either that or corrupt. No legit cop would enter a residence alone and without a search warrant."

"I know I didn't like his tone of voice when he told the old landlord he'd been unable to get his hands on me. It freaked me out."

It had made Jack see red too. Lauren spoke before he could tell her.

"Bill didn't keep much. He hated clutter. Said he was born for the electronic world. Did everything online. All financial transactions were done online and all of his records from personal to work were stored in databases and on his laptop that, I now realize, he never let out of his sight."

Jack changed lanes, wondering what life with someone like that would be. Not fun. "The place made me feel as if I were in a sterile bubble."

"Good assessment." Lauren directed her gaze out the window.

Jack sensed there was so much she wasn't saying about her life with Collins. "From my experience, kids and dogs don't fit in bubbles, they pop them."

She nodded. "Guess that was part of why he flipped. Maybe the chaos was more than he could handle and something he always blamed me for. To him normal was being perfectly ordered at all times. He didn't see the boys often after we separated."

Jack bit back his anger and disgust for Bill and directed it toward himself as he saw his divorce from Jill in a new light. He understood parenting wasn't for everyone, but once a kid was born, both parents had to step up to the plate. Instead of doing just that where his daughter was concerned, he'd let Jill cut him out of the game. What the hell? Why was he just seeing that now? They were back at the hotel before he knew it.

When they opened the door, the boys, still awake and going strong, raced up to him and Lauren, excitement shining in their eyes. They spoke to him at the same time, in a wild rush that he couldn't decipher.

Angie looked done in. "I made the mistake of letting them up to have one preterm race before going to sleep."

Lauren frowned. "What's that?"

“Don’t know.”

“We need a preterm track, Mr. Jack.” Matt’s brow was creased with a serious frown.

“Please, sir,” Mitch added, eyes pleading as if his world hung on the answer.

Realization dawned. “They’re talking about a predetermined race track. So everyone has the same advantage.” Jack looked at Lauren. “I don’t mind. It’s up to you.”

“Just one race,” Lauren told the boys. “Then it’s bedtime.”

“Okay.” Jack rubbed his hands together with enthusiasm. “You two go sit in the chairs over there until I get my racing gear ready. I won’t be more than two minutes.” The boys nodded and dashed to the chairs, scrambling to sit down.

Angie laughed. “I’ve been trying to make that happen all night.”

“Watch NASCAR,” Jack said as he went through the adjoining door, to store his gun safely out of the reach of little hands. “The guys racing aren’t much different than the twins, and there’re all kinds of rules racers have to obey or get penalized for.”

Lauren laughed. “Smart man.”

Jack returned with some hastily gathered supplies. He told the twins about his Pinewood Derby racing days in Boy Scouts as he set about constructing an agreed upon route that employed just about every surface in the hotel room from a luggage rack to the bed pillows, excepting the table and chairs in which Lauren and Angie now huddled. He made a quick checkered flag, a red flag and a yellow flag out of paper and borrowed clothing, and set himself up as judge. The race was on. He had no doubt the twins could have run the Daytona 500 by foot and beat the drivers with the amount of energy they had. He and Livy used to have fun times like these and he realized he ached deep inside that they’d disappeared with the divorce.

The race was over too soon and there were no fights when he declared Mitch the winner. But he’d made a grave mistake. The boys were begging to join the Boy Scouts in the morning so they could make Pinewood Derby cars and race.

“When you start school in a few weeks,” Lauren told them. “Meanwhile you had better get a good night’s sleep or you’ll be too tired to win the races.”

“Pomise,” Mitch asked.

“Your solid oak,” Matt added.

“My solid oak.” Lauren smiled. “Now brush your teeth and hit the sack.”

The boys rushed to the bathroom and Jack laughed. “What’s solid oak mean?”

The warmth of love in Lauren’s eyes as she explained made her unbelievably beautiful and knocked him for a loop. “At first the boys mistook the words solid oak for solemn oath, but once they learned what it was supposed to be, they chose to stick with their own method of promise. Solemn oath doesn’t have any substance to it, whereas the big solid oak tree in the backyard means something really important.”

Jack nodded. He could remember just how huge promises were to him at six years old and it also made him remember who the most important man in his life was at the time. His father.

Matt and Mitch's father would never walk through the door and speak to them again because Jack had killed him. An iron fist closed around Jack's heart and squeezed hard. He hurt for them and for the part he'd played in Bill's death.

Maybe he didn't have the right to be here. Maybe it was wrong, and maybe it would only intensify the collateral damage of reveling the truth to Lauren later, but he was incapable of walking away from their emotional needs any more than he could have left them under gunfire in a battlefield—an apt description of life at times.

"I'll say good night now." Jack quickly left the room, shutting the adjoining door. All reasons aside, he shouldn't be playing with Bill's sons. Protect them yes, but build their hopes into thinking Jack was something more than the glorified killer he was? No. Nor should he be lusting after Bill's widow.

With his insides all twisted in knots, he showered and mulled over his conversation with Lauren, getting his ducks in a row. He had to call Commander Weston before he hit the sack and he was not looking forward to the event.

Turning on his phone, he was surprised to see he had only one text from Weston.

Jack opened the message and stared at it a moment, stunned, simply because he expected to read an ass-chewing. *Call me. Mari is in trouble.* He hit the speed dial.

"About time you surfaced," Weston said, his voice almost a whisper.

"What's wrong with Mari?"

"Hold on. Let me step outside so I don't wake her. She's finally resting."

"Outside where?" Jack demanded. "Damn it. What's happened?"

Jack heard Weston's description of the attack on Mari, about Neil's car being stolen and his house shot to hell. "Please tell me they've nailed the bastard to a tree by his yellow balls."

"Not yet."

"Is she going to be all right? The baby?"

Weston's tension-filled exhale grabbed Jack by the throat.

"Damn it, Roger. What are you not saying?"

"Physically, once she starts eating and gets into a prenatal care program, she should be fine. They're going to keep her for a day or two in the hospital then she can go home. What happened today has traumatized her, but I think more than that has her jumping out of her skin every time the breeze moves. I know something traumatic happened to her in Afghanistan. Did Neil ever mention what to you?"

"I was there when he brought her in" Jack said. "It was the night our team had gone into find Ackbajeen?"

"Yeah."

“Neil found her imprisoned in a windowless cell in the bowels of a fairly well-to-do compound-like house. Someone had left her to starve to death and she was literally at death’s door. I don’t know much more than that. Why?”

“I think she’s been—”

“What?”

“Never mind. What we do need to talk about is you getting your ass back here before I can’t cover it any more. What the hell do you think you are doing, DT?”

“The right thing. Do you know Bill Collins left Atlanta suddenly the very same day that the daughters of Ambassador James and Israel’s Prime Minister Shalev were kidnapped? Do you know that his body has gone missing from the Brazilian authorities today? Do you know that Lauren Collins and her six-year-old twin sons have a trained assassin after them? AWOL me if you have to, but I’m not abandoning her and her kids until this is over.”

Weston exhaled hard. “There’s no doubt then? Bill Collins is the man who hid in the armoire?”

“Facts are stacking up in my favor.”

“What does his wife know?”

“Make that his almost ex. Not much, but she can help me get into his life and piece together what in the hell Bill was up to and who’s was behind it. Bill worked for a tree-hugging company called BioLogics. Started two years ago and immediately went shady on his whereabouts and doings. So that company is a great starting point. I have to tell you that I just don’t buy it that that tiny radical group we took out in Lebanon pulled off the high profile kidnappings. Not without major connections and funding.”

“I’ll check on things from this end. Keep me posted then and would you keep in mind that *Posse Comitatus* is not dead. The lines have been a bit blurred lately but it’s still considered law, which means no military action on American soil is sanctioned. In other words this isn’t your egg to fry.”

“Too late,” Jack said. “But I’ll be careful. That reminds me. Whoever we are up against has resources out the whazoo and they’ve either stolen a cop car or have a cop moonlighting on the wrong side of the law.” He gave Weston the license plate numbers to check out as well as the names of Bill’s friends. “There has to be a connection to Lebanon somewhere.”

“Let’s hope. I’ve got an inside at the Agency I’ll try and tap before I bother my cousin Paul with this. Though if there is a connection everyone will be PO’d that I sat on it. Watch your back, DT.”

“Will do. Keep an eye on Mari and let me know when they nail the bastard who hurt her. I want to be there when he goes down for his crimes.”

“If he makes it that far. I’m hoping the cops shoot to kill,” Weston said. “I’m not letting Mari out of my sight.”

Jack disconnected. Over the years he’d heard Weston under pressure, in battle and going balls to the wall under gunfire, and never had he heard such deadly intent in his voice before. Jack set up the computer

and hit the internet, putting BioLogics and Bill Collins under a microscope. From all articles and links, BioLogics was exactly what Lauren had said, a company dedicated to promoting green technology. Its ownership was obscured in a conglomeration of companies that he could find no head honcho on. Also, it was completely funded by charitable donations and listed as a non-profit. That sent his blood pressure steaming. How in the hell did crap like that go on and on?

After a frustrating hour, he went to bed, but took forever to fall asleep, visions of Lauren danced through his head. With her as a wife, a man had to be a total imbecile to have gone after anything else. The look of her, the feel of her, the total package from her vulnerable bottom lip to the fierce fire in her eyes when it came to protecting Matt and Mitch was more than amazing. He closed his eyes and saw her back in the shower with the water sluicing down her creamy neck and the way her shirt clung to the contours of her almost visible breasts. He hated to admit it, but more than his hand had itched to take a wet ride then, and the feeling had only grown. He so would have backed her to the wall in her almost-ex's condo and wiped the SOB from her mind. There was something not quite sane about his need for her and it scared the hell out of him. She was in the other room and had never been in his room, yet he could smell her scent, a combination of lavender and warm honey. This time the gripping knot in his gut sent pulsing sensations southward, tightening his already aching groin. It was going to be a long, hard night.

He tried to knock himself back into line. Tried to put what she stirred in him on ice. His purpose here was to keep them safe and that package didn't include his dick. Besides, any avenue he could take with Lauren once this was over was a dead end street that had Bill Collins's gravestone carved all over it.

Chapter Twenty

0130 hours, August 6th

Unable to sleep, Lauren lay in the dark as the day ran through her mind over and over again. Weaving through it all was the puzzle of Jack. One minute he was the most relaxed man she'd ever met, then the next she'd catch a hint of ghosts and pain in his eyes and knew he had to be the most tortured man. The two didn't mesh, but that was the truth of it and it made him more than just a sexy man, made him more than just a soldier. The puzzle somehow made him more real and more a part of her.

She heard a groan and sat up, her heart pounding as she listened carefully. Angie and the boys were still asleep. Hearing the groan again, she placed it as coming from Jack's room. It sounded as if he were dreaming, and not pleasantly either. She got up and went to the adjoining door to listen. Hearing nothing more, she cracked the door open. Light from his computer screen showed him twisting and turning in bed as if he were wrestling an invisible enemy. His body was covered in sweat and his muscles were strained so taut that they silently screamed pain. Her heart twisted with the need to help him. Letting the door close behind her, she flipped on the light switch which triggered a lamp in the far corner, barely lighting the room. She crossed to the bed and tapped Jack on the shoulder.

"Jack—"

He exploded from the bed. She stumbled back and fell on her butt to stare up at him and the vibrant power electrifying his every move. She could likely just watch him...forever it seemed. He was so different from Bill, so roughly honed, a battle-experienced soldier, hardened by life, but yet so much more approachable. Or was it an element of tenderness she sensed in Jack that her husband never possessed.

"What is it?" He scanned the room and then held out a hand to help her up.

"You were having a nightmare." She grabbed his hand. He pulled her up and something happened. There was a shift in the inches of air separating them. Every nerve she had stood up and said, "Hello, baby," to the obvious flare of desire in his eyes when he looked at her. His need seemed to equal the desperation of her own. She opened her mouth, imagining his kiss, imagining his firm lips claiming hers. The fire in his green gaze blazed white hot. She blinked and then saw the scars on his chest, on his hip, on his leg. The badges of honor marred the perfection of his maleness and made her want to touch him even more.

What he had to have suffered hit her deep inside and tugged her closer to him, emotionally and physically, making him so much less than the stranger he should be. She wanted him, wanted to go back to

that moment in the condo when he'd said, *I'd back you to that wall right there, or any place you wanted to go, and do everything in my power to wipe him from your mind.*

She shivered as she stared at him. It was so easy for her to imagine his rock hard body driving her every want to completion, fulfilling her every fantasy. She pressed her hand to the warmth of his chest, reveling in his fresh spice and mint scent and leaned closer to him. Jack was so different from Bill; in look, in action, in beliefs, even in the way he interacted with Matt and Mitch. Jack had thrown all of himself into the race he'd set up for the boys. Whenever Bill had played with them, it seemed that he'd only given half-assed efforts to it minutes before bedtime after he'd checked his mail and read the paper.

Jack inhaled hard and reared his head back; his flaring nostrils gave testament to the hot desire radiating from him. He stood in front of Lauren and thought he would surely die on the spot. Color rode high on her cheeks and her eyes, that could be the softest blue, flashed with hot emotion. From the contour of her breasts and defined shape of her nipples beneath her cotton T, he could tell she was aroused.

Talk about waving a red flag in front of a bull.

She touched a scar along his collar bone. "How could you ever think you aren't a better man than Bill?"

He fought for control. "Because it's true. I ki—"

"Did you get these scars by being a traitor like Bill?" she demanded, cutting off his confession.

"No." He couldn't seem to start his sentence over again. It was just three words. *I killed Bill.*

"Did you do to your wife and child what Bill has done to us?"

"No."

"So what happened between you and her?"

He clenched his fist. Talking about Bill and Jill—Ha, the names rhymed!—was the last thing he wanted to be doing at the moment. "When I go on assignment, I never know how long I will be gone and I'm not at liberty to say where I am. Though Jill thought she could handle it, she couldn't. She grew very bitter, and in the end found comfort other places. As for Livy, that gets more complicated."

"Kids have a way of doing that to life and situations," she murmured. But he caught on that she wasn't focused on wanting answers anymore. Her gaze was on his chest, and hunger was in her eyes. She slid her palm down from his shoulder to touch the bruising by his left nipple.

The purplish injuries had faded to a yellowish-green, but the extent of the trauma he'd suffered was still visible. He gritted his teeth and tried to suck air into lungs that had forgotten how to breathe. He grabbed her wrist, intending to pull her hand from his chest. Instead, he groaned and pressed her palm deeper into his skin. For just a moment, he told himself. It had been so long since he'd been touched, so long since he'd accepted physical comfort from someone else that he literally did not have the strength to pull away. That's all his attraction was to her. He was a starved man and she was an appetizing woman.

Yeah right. He was old enough to have been both starved and in the intimate company of an attractive woman and never before experienced the strength and urgency fueling his desire now.

God help him. It was wrong, but he shut his eyes and absorbed her offering, wanting the impossible. Wanting to kiss her lush mouth and fulfill every promise throbbing in the air between them on the soft bed behind him.

He opened his eyes, meeting her gaze head on as he lowered his mouth to hers. The control that had governed his entire life lay in pieces at her feet.

“You’re a hero, Jack Hunter.” She tip-toed up and kissed the scar on his temple.

Jack shuddered hard at Lauren’s kiss, too far gone to correct her. Her scent was up his nose, her breasts were inches from his chest, her lush mouth was ripe, and he had to taste her or die. Before he could think twice, he groaned and planted his mouth on hers.

She gasped, hesitated a bare second, then leaned into him, meeting his tongue with hers. Her breasts brushed his chest, her hard nipples a ready invitation he couldn’t refuse. He let loose the full force of his desire. Cupping her ass with one hand, he lifted her and backed her to the wall, pinning her against it with a thrust of his erection to the heart of her crotch. He braced his fisted hand against the wall and pressed his chest into her soft breasts and groaned deep.

She moaned and arched into him, pressing impossibly closer as she wrapped her legs around his hips. She tasted and felt like pure lavender-scented heaven and he would have gladly died that very minute just to enter her pearly gates. The thought of sliding into her wetness, the feel of her body branding-hot against his, the taste of her sweet tongue, silky and seductive, had him trembling from head to toe. Her hands were everywhere, touching him, feeling him. He grew light-headed and had to fight off a wave of dizziness as his blood rushed south and filled his so-hard-he-hurt dick. Going for gold, he cupped her breasts, brushing her glorious nipples with his thumbs until she writhed against him. She was breathing and shaking just as hard as he. But it wasn’t enough. He wanted more. He wanted her flesh against his flesh. He wanted to taste her everywhere.

He snatched up her T-shirt, more than ready to fill his mouth with her fullness. He pressed a kiss to the center of her chest and slid his tongue to her nipple, feeling her heart pound hard against his face.

A heart he’d yet to be honest with.

Had yet to tell that he’d killed Bill.

The father of her children.

Some hero...

He jerked back, releasing her shirt as he fought for air. She just gazed at him, stunned, mouth open, a mouth made plumper by his lust.

"Damn, I'm sorry," he gasped, shell-shocked by what he had done. Keeping her steady with a bracing arm, he eased himself back, releasing her from the wall. She lowered her legs and leaned back heavily. He stepped away and fisted his hands, thoroughly disgusted with himself.

"You're wrong, Lauren. I'm no hero. I kil—" he couldn't force the words "killed Bill" from his mouth, but he did latch onto painting a real picture of who he was and what he did.

"You want to know what my job is? I kill people. I go into a situation and I take out targets. Sometimes the only thing separating me from the bad guys is whose point of view you happen to be in. Freedom, our freedom, comes with a price and sometimes that price is really ugly to face. We take out targets, and it's my job to make sure each combatant is dead before I leave the room. As my ex says, in my line of work, hero is just another word for killer."

She flinched, and he turned away. He didn't want to watch her revulsion. He'd chosen which side he was going to fight on and he carried through with that resolve. Sometimes, there was a distinct line of good and evil, sometimes the line was blurred, and sometimes his side was in the wrong. But he'd given his oath and he stuck things out through the thick and the thin. Life wasn't perfect and neither was any issue or situation. Killing came with a heavy price. He would always carry the burden of the deaths in his life, both of the teammates he had lost and of the men he'd killed in the line of duty. He never forgot for a moment that the target had to be someone's son, husband, or brother. That the target believed just as strongly in the side he fought on as Jack did on his own side.

"Go to bed," he told her. "And next time, leave me to my nightmares."

They were so much easier to take than impossible dreams. She was an impossible dream.

His answer was to hear the door close. She'd left and only then did he let himself draw a painful breath.

Fayetteville, North Carolina

Though unable to sleep, Mari Dalton kept her eyes shut. Roger Weston was with her, his reassuring presence had eased her choking fear. In her mind, she could still hear the man promising to make her pay, promising to kill her, and every time she drifted asleep, his face, his hate resurrected and joined the jeering faces of the men who had violently taken her innocence. She had thought she would die then, had wanted to die then, for surely death was preferable to living with such shame, but her spirit wouldn't let her die. She'd survived and she'd faced the shame and she'd learned to live even though her family had reviled her.

When Neil had found her and loved her despite her shame she thought Allah had forgiven and blessed her. Now she questioned if all the blessings she'd been given over the past few years were no more than just a greater punishment. To have found safety and freedom. To have found loving and friendship. To be given the miracle of a child, only to have them all taken away was a cruel knife to her heart. Though her

stomach had stopped cramping, she just knew she would lose her child, no matter what the doctor said. She had tried to be so good. She had tried to be pure.

But perhaps she deserved no better, for she had failed.

For as much as she loved Neil and grieved his loss, for as committed as she was to be the perfect wife to him forever and yearned for his presence. For as determined as she was to ignore, and yes even cut out the part of her that had sprung to life, her insides clenched every time Roger Weston walked into a room. She remembered the first time it happened. Neil's commander had been away somewhere that even Neil could not know of when she had first come to America. She and Neil had been married for six months and she could hardly believe the blessing that both Neil and Allah had showered upon her. Then Roger Weston had walked in the front door of her happy home and her stomach had knotted. She'd broken out in a heated sweat and had been so physically disturbed by what happened that she had had to excuse herself. She'd feigned an illness and had spent the rest of the evening alone in her bed while Neil and his friends had watched a special football game on the television.

Now she was pretending again. Pretending that Roger Weston didn't disturb her, but it wasn't working. She felt him there and, Allah forgive her, she was so thankful that he was even though it sharpened her grief for Neil. Made her loss more painful because deep in her heart she wondered if she had been unfaithful to Neil by her reaction to his commander.

She truly might deserve to die, but still her spirit refused to let go.

She brushed away more tears of guilt and grief with the end of her blanket and drew another deep breath. She had vowed she would never use the phone number Roger Weston had given her after telling her that Allah had taken Neil away from her. But then that man today had left her no choice. And even now, she did not have the strength to deny herself and send Roger Weston away. Maybe tomorrow she would be stronger.

Every noise, every time the door opened, her heart would race with fear. Sure that man had found her to deliver the punishment he promised. She—

A rough groan brought her eyes wide open and had her sitting straight up in bed. Her heart leapt to her throat and pounded hard in her chest as she searched the shadows of the room for danger. She knew in her mind that the door to her room was closed and had not been opened. She knew it was impossible for that man to be there, but she could not stop her fear. It wasn't until she heard another groan that she realized it was Roger Weston. He slouched low in the chair across the small room, his long legs sprawled out, and his head resting against the chair back and the wall. He appeared asleep, but it was not a peaceful rest. His breathing was rapid, his hands gripped the side arms tightly, and his head jerked slightly in a repetitive denial of whatever nightmare had gripped him.

"Mr. Weston," she said softly then repeated a little louder. He didn't wake and looked as if he was in such distress from his dream that she couldn't just leave him. Though her body was sore all over, though

her hands and knees throbbed with every movement, she slid from the bed and walked across the chilled floor. Wearing only the thin material of the hospital gown to cover her practically naked body was so sinful that she turned back to the bed and pulled the blanket from it and covered herself. By the time she finished, she was nearly groaning from the sharp pain in her hands. As she turned back to Roger Weston, she heard his jagged whisper. “No...God...no. Not Neil. Not DT. Not Rico. Not Pecos. I didn’t have a choice. I had to...had to decide. Don’t you understand, Beck? I had to. God help me... I had to.”

Roger Weston’s cry for his God so matched Mari’s own cry to Allah that her already hurting and grieving heart twisted with even more pain. She moved closer to Roger, spoke to him again, but still he did not hear her. With no other choice, she reached out and touched him, more aware of the power and heat of his muscled shoulder than she ever had the right to be. And that was through her bandages. Touching him skin to skin would be... Allah, forgive me.

“Mr. Weston.” She shook his shoulder this time. He jerked awake with a start, nearly coming straight up out of the chair. She reared back and wobbled for balance, even crying out a little in shock.

He caught her arm, balancing her. “What is it? You shouldn’t be up. You should have just called me. Do you need the nurse?”

Before she could find her voice to answer him, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her back to the bed.

“I tried calling out to you,” she told him, barely finding her voice amid the flooding sensations of his scent, his heat, his strength. “But you were asleep.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. What did you need?” he asked, setting her back in the bed as if she were made of glass. And perhaps she was; she thought she would break apart at any moment from the emotions battling within her breast and the pain trying to drag her under a dark abyss.

She drew the blanket to her, too aware of him so close. “I-I didn’t need anything. You were in pain, a nightmare. I think. You spoke of Neil and others and were so distressed from your dream that I had to wake you.”

“What did I say?” His jagged, almost angry tone surprised her and made her peer closer at his face in the shadowed room. His rough jaw, hooked nose, dark unruly hair and blue eyes were all familiar to her, but there was something completely different about him that wasn’t there before Neil had died. And whatever nightmare he was having about Neil and the other men, it was still with him. She could see it in his eyes and read it in the sudden tension gripping his every visible muscle.

“Only that you didn’t have a choice. That you had to decide.”

He exhaled sharply.

“What is it? What happened?”

“Nothing. Forget anything you heard. It was just a nightmare. Not real. Not important. Go back to sleep. I won’t disturb you again. I’ll be in the hallway stretching my legs.” He turned away from her and didn’t look back as he left the room.

Mari blinked at the closing door, realizing Roger Weston had just lied to her. His nightmare had been important and he was as haunted by ghosts as she was.

Roger stepped out into the hospital hallway and braced himself against the wall, barely curbing the urge to bang his head against it. What he’d almost revealed in his sleep—what really happened in Lebanon and how Neil had died—made him sick inside.

Heart racing double-time to his careening thoughts, he broke out in a cold sweat and pressed his palms to his eyes to stop the images flashing in his mind. The dead. The dying. The gravely hurt. The women. The children. His men.

All because he’d made a decision. A decision that as a commander he’d make over and over again. A decision that given the way it played out, he couldn’t seem to live with as a man.

Collateral damage was the prettied-up phrase to describe untargeted death in warfare, or more accurately, the accidental murder of innocents. Friendly fire was the palliative phrase for accidental murder by a royal fuck-up. Legally excusable murder, and both of them sat squarely on his shoulders. But that wasn’t the worst part. Every commander, every soldier realized the world wasn’t perfect and shit happened. That in any war there would be collateral damage. That in any battle friendly fire could happen. It was what he had to do every day in the aftermath of Lebanon that had him torn completely in two. Lying to the world and to the men who trusted him most.

But the only salient point—goal, objective, whatever tag the military and Presidential brass wanted to put on it—in the situation was to avoid fanning the flames of World War at all cost. A big picture that Roger agreed with as much as he disagreed with covering up of the truth. Thus his grueling state of turmoil.

His cell phone vibrated and he quickly dug it from his pocket, hoping it was Officer Cain with the news that Mari’s attacker had been apprehended or, better yet, dead. But no such luck. It was Beck, DT’s best friend and the one man Roger didn’t want to talk to at the moment but didn’t dare to avoid. Beck was the wild card that could bring the cover up down like a house of cards.

“Weston.” Roger ascertained that the hallway was empty. Just to be sure though, he kept his voice low.

Beck didn’t say anything, but then given Beck’s recent behavior the man might be too drunk to speak.

“Where are you, man?”

“Sober.”

“That’s good.”

“No, sir. That’s not so good. You see, at least drunk I can rationalize what we’re doing to DT, Rico and Pecos. Sober I can’t. Just fuck the rest of the world, sir.”

“We can’t and you know it. It will set the radicals on fire.”

“You can’t but I’m pretty damn sure I could. And in case you haven’t seen the news today, they’re already on fire. We sacrificed our souls and lied for nothing. Christ, if I could go back and do it all over again, I would have never identified that Muhammad al Qassem entered the terrorist’s hideout. DT would have nailed al-Qaeda’s number two SOB from the inside anyway. I never fucking imagined you’d send in a missile.”

“You’re not remembering it all. Comm—”

“I know. Communications were dead.”

“So were—”

“The signs of life signals. I know. I do remember shit. And I remember saying that I still heard gunfire inside the hideout.”

“Which, given the data we had, meant that the men Qassem brought with him were firing on the terrorist. Most likely there to take Prime Minister Shalev’s daughter and Ambassador James’s daughter hostage from the original kidnappers. The odds that DT, Neil, Rico and Pecos were still alive were minimal at that point.”

“But they were damn it, and I knew it in my gut.”

Weston turned to face the wall and rested his forehead on the hard cement.

“Beck, you and I both know that sometimes decisions can’t be made on gut feelings. We had to go with the facts. That we now know about the existence of Wipeout and its ability to disable our systems doesn’t change the decision we had to make then.” Experts were still trying to analyze the jamming device the terrorists had used. The downed communications and signs of life signals had been bad, but the effect the device had on the Samson’s GPS had been a disaster. The Samson was the newest air-to-surface missile in the precision strike arsenal with an accuracy of less than a meter. The missile, launched from a UH-60 Black Hawk, was the US’s compliment to Israel’s Delilah and had a small but effective warhead designed to keep collateral damage to a minimum. But it was the stored explosives, both in the terrorist’s hideout and in the building next door, a supposed orphanage, that had caused the devastation.

“You’re wrong, Commander. You were wrong then and you’re wrong now. DT, Rico and Pecos deserve the truth.”

“Damn it, Beck. We’ve set a course and we have to see it through. Do you have any idea what the global ramifications would be if you blew the lid off of this? The orders came from the top and it’s our sworn duty to—”

The line went dead in Roger’s ear. Shit. Bad just turned worse.

Chapter Twenty-One

0330 hours

“¿Y ahora que, George?” Andreas demanded, wanting to know what would be next in the continuous plague of disasters following Bill Collins’s betrayal. Flying at the top speed of four Rolls-Royce Trent 977/B engines in an Airbus A380 customized by Design Q in Worcestershire, he sat in the fully outfitted Turkish bath with George at his side, agitated that he couldn’t relax and enjoy his newest acquisition. He’d recently bought the flying palace off the hands of an oil-rich prince whose well had run dry when his father disapproved of his repeated dalliance with a junked-out pop star.

The thought of having eighteen hours to twiddle his thumbs before reaching *El Santuario* had him stretched over a torturous rack of painful frustration—pain that the incompetence of Fidel’s hired operatives in Atlanta only sharpened. The therapeutic benefits of the mint showers and eucalyptus steam room did little to help ease him. Not even Mozart’s “*Eine kleine Nachtmusik*” being broadcasted live from the musicians in the concert hall above helped. Minute by minute the reports feeding in from Atlanta went from bad to worse. Bill’s wife and children had escaped and they had help now. Someone who could handle a gun, a man by the name of Jack Hunter that Andreas’s resources were having difficulty in getting information on. Hunter’s abandoned rental car had been found on Angie Freemont’s street about fifty yards away from where Lauren Collins had parked hers.

Sure at any moment he’d be driven past his soft-spoken vow to screaming like a maniac, he shut his eyes and upped the volume of the music. He tried to focus on easing his anger as he turned his mind to his home above all others, *El Santuario*. Almost as big as an entire Peruvian region, *El Santuario* housed Andreas’s perfect home, his research and development facility, and George’s personal primate reserve, where a number of George’s wild brethren roamed. The area also provided an ample and secretive operational base for his special ops teams as well as anything else he wanted to keep from prying eyes. He imagined exactly what he would do the minute he arrived. Bill Collins’s body would already be there and so would the traitor’s wife and children. Andreas would personally extract what in the hell Collins’s had planned to do with the formula for GXP from his wife, using the children, of course. Then he’d make an example of Collins’s family.

Putting the fear of *Diablo* himself into the people working for him was the only way to close ranks on Collins’s betrayal. The video of the event would make the current executions on YouTube look like Walt Disney films. Andreas prided himself on speaking softly and carrying a big stick—the binding, torturing

and killing of a betrayer's family made for a really big stick—one that he anticipated George would have a hand in this time.

The kids would never even see it coming. Cute, funny chimp suddenly going murderously wild. The video would likely go viral.

Andreas must have had the music unusually loud because he never heard Fidel knock. He felt George move and opened his eyes to see Fidel standing fearfully before him. George had moved to stand between Andreas and Fidel, clearly agitated and wanting to protect Andreas. Andreas's heart swelled.

Fidel had better have good news. “¿Que?”

“We're f-f-finally learning that J-J-Jack Hunter is part of the US Military, and Guru has decrypted one of Collins's email acc-counts.” Fidel's skin color went from green to white and back to green.

“And?” Andreas stood, barely choking back the accompanying yell that went with his question. Why should he have to pull information out of his own assistant?

“C-C-Collins's l-l-l-left you a m-m-message on it.”

Andreas blinked. “¿QUE?” He almost shouted when Fidel didn't say a more. Instead he bit his tongue until it bled.

George immediately went ape shit, jumping up and down, holding his ears and crying.

“The n-n-note s-s-says that proof of your involvement in the terrorist acts h-h-has been sent to a n-n-number of sources along with the f-fuel formula.”

“¡Madre de Dios!” Andreas screamed.

George went for Fidel's face first, ripping skin, biting off ears and then Fidel's fleshy lips. Fidel screamed and flailed in horror and shock, thrusting his hands out to stop George. George only ate them and ripped them off the man. The Turkish bath ran red with the spewing blood. Andreas breathed in the acrid scent, remembering times when the smell meant his power and rule were supreme. He didn't intervene. It was time for a new Fidel anyway.

When Fidel was nothing but pieces, Andreas calmed George down. He cleaned them both up in the mint showers. Then he sent George off with his nanny to rest. After shoving Fidel's remains into a garbage chute that would be jettisoned over the Atlantic, Andreas went to find Guru with his usually soft spoken calm restored and the tones of “*Eine kleine Nachtmusik*” bolstering his resolve. He supposed he shouldn't feel too bad about losing his control and yelling. After all, the Godfather had had his moments as well.

Dios, whatever diabolical double cross Collins had set in motion had to be stopped dead in its tracks immediately. And so did everyone else the bastard had involved. Nothing and no one was going to interfere with the legacy of safety that economic and environmental justice would bring to his son. No matter what the cost.

When Guru heard that Fidel was out of a job, the man worked like a genius on steroids and soon produced emailed confirmations from Collins's account of packages delivered just two days ago. The

names and addresses of the recipients were conveniently included. One to Lauren Collins. One to Matt and one to Mitch Collins. One to Conrad Gardner. One to Thomas Ettinger. One to Edward Weiss. One to Bob Cantrell. And one to Ray Branson. Assassins were immediately dispatched.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Buford, Georgia

0900 hours

“Thomas’s house is the next one on the left,” Laruen directed as Jack drove. The morning was bright and peaceful and at complete odds with the hellish night she had spent. Violence from the day, the heat of Jack’s kiss and his haunted words afterward had run roughshod over her mind, making her shiver in fear, sweat with need, and writhe in pain for him until she’d given up trying to sleep and spent the rest of the night sitting in the desk chair, staring at the letter Bill had written.

She still didn’t have a clue as to what Bill meant. Now she was sleep deprived and feeling self-conscious over her complete abandonment of everything beneath Jack’s potent kiss. Kiss? It was more like a rehearsal for a grand slam home run. He’d conquered second base, had touched on third, and there had been nothing to stop him from scoring.

Fire filled her cheeks again. How had she let it happen? Angie and her sons were in the other room. She’d only met Jack less than ten hours before. To hell with the whole quality verses quantity crap. That amount of time compared to the strength of her desire was pure insanity.

Could be worse, a little voice said, much like her son’s would say when they were caught being bad. *What if you didn’t regret it?*

She didn’t.

Could be worse, the little voice said again. *You could want a repeat and more.*

She did. Every single moment of it and every bit of him. His demanding tongue, his hard erection, his hot hands. His intoxicating scent, powerful muscles and gripping passion. The whole damn package.

“Lauren, hello, are you with me?”

Lauren blinked and focused her eyes on Jack, whom she had been apparently staring at as she recalled him and his kiss. She shifted her gaze as a knowing gleam flickered through his green eyes. *He knew. He knew what she was thinking and OMG, he knew she wanted more.* “Sorry, I was thinking about Bill’s letter,” she said, primly. “What did you say?”

Well, it was partly true. She had thought about it for a brief moment.

He snorted his disbelief. “I asked you if Ettinger usually kept his security gate open.”

Lauren sat upright, her gaze riveting to the open gate looming ahead of them. “No. The man is a stickler for security. He has Conrad Gardner’s security company upgrade his system every year.”

"I don't like it." Jack hit the gas and rushed on past Thomas's driveway.

Lauren gripped her seat as Jack quickly snaked around several curves before bringing the car to a stop just inside another driveway on the left. He edged the car to the right of the road so others could pass and killed the engine.

"I don't know what I was thinking." He pressed his palm to his temple. "I should have left you safe at the hotel with Rico."

Rico was an army buddy of Jack's who had shown up early this morning after Jack called him in the middle of the night. Even with his right arm in a sling, the dark-haired, dark-eyed man looked extremely capable of handling any safety issue that might arise and made Lauren feel immensely better about leaving her sons with Angie at the hotel this morning.

Rico stood several inches above what she'd guesstimated to be Jack's six-foot height and had studied her intently when introduced. She'd met his gaze head-on and waited for him to pass judgment. He obviously knew of Bill's terrorist activities and she wanted to cringe inside. It hit her that people would think she was involved in what Bill had been doing.

She hadn't thought of it but Jack figured the men after her would know who he was by now from the rental car left on Angie's street and would then find record of the second car he'd rented. He had Rico bring him a car and they'd left the old rental car at the mall this morning.

"You think something has happened to Thomas, don't you?" Lauren shifted sharply in her seat to face Jack and tugged on his free hand to break his reverie. "We need to hurry to him."

She opened the car door.

"No." He grabbed her arm. "You're staying here."

"Like a sitting duck? No, thank you. I'll take my chances hiding behind some trees while you check on Thomas, so don't waste your breath arguing now."

Jack cursed his displeasure, but still grabbed his backpack and exited the car with her. He guided her into the forested terrain. Though the air had a touch of fall to it, the southern sun was still warm enough to bring a sheen of perspiration over her skin, dampening the blue baby-doll T-shirt she'd bought last night and her jeans. The scent of pine, dense woods and lake water filled her nose. Jack stopped the moment they were out of sight of the car.

"If you're going to go any farther then you do exactly what I say when I say," he told her. "That doesn't mean move five feet and take a shower when I tell you to stay in one spot."

She blinked at him and nearly tripped over a root. "Getting rid of the tear gas—"

"Turned out to be the right logical decision to make in that circumstance," he interrupted her, his expression grim. "But it could have just as easily been the wrong decision too. It wasn't following orders and we don't go a step farther unless I have your word that you will do as I say. I've got enough blood on my hands. We clear?" His direct gaze held the ghosts he worked hard to keep at bay.

She swallowed the rising lump of emotion his stark words and expression caused. War never left a man unscathed and she could see that Jack bore scars, deep ones. “Roger that,” she said, repeating her brother’s favorite response. “You have my word, Jack.”

He nodded. “Then let’s go.”

The pace he set through the trees seemed agonizingly slow to her as she wanted to run to Thomas’s house. She didn’t realize it until she saw the surface of green-blue water rippling just ahead that Jack had cut his way down to the lake before heading to Thomas’s house next door.

Reaching the water, Jack crouched behind a cropping of bushes and looked up at the sky. “Damn. I’m afraid this is going to be bad.”

“What?” Lauren joined him and squinted up at the sky, expecting to see the dark clouds of an approaching storm.

He pointed at two large black birds flying in a circle overhead. “I thought I heard buzzards but wasn’t sure.” He opened his backpack and slipped out a pair of binoculars, directing his gaze toward Thomas’s house, which was partially visible from its perch on the wooded hillside.

His body tensed. He had seen something. “What is it?” she whispered.

“Either our friendly neighborhood assassin and his side-kick cop have a set of twins or they’re a step ahead of us. They’re on the back deck of the house looking at a broken rail.” Jack shifted the binoculars. “There’s a body on the ground, but from the looks of him, he’s been dead a while. Let’s go.”

“But—”

“Orders are not discussions. We’ll talk later. Stay low. Stay behind me, and make as little noise as possible.”

She followed Jack like a shadow until they reached the car. Once inside, he took off, going opposite the direction of Thomas’s house. The circling road would eventually take them back to the entrance to the subdivision. He handed her his phone. “Turn it on and call Edward Weiss. See if you can get him on the phone. Then turn it back off.”

“All right, but shouldn’t we call the police? They might be able to catch the killers at Thomas’s house.”

“Those two are likely killers, but they didn’t kill the man on the ground. Not unless they did it a day or two ago and returned to the scene of the crime, which is highly unlikely. The broken rail leads to the thought that he could have fallen, but that’s just too damn suspicious to believe. We can’t call the police until we reach a pay phone. Even if there is a chance they already know who I am, with a dirty cop after us, I’m not giving them anything they can use to track me down.”

Thomas was dead, or at least someone was dead. And it was real. Dear God. Her hand shook as she dialed information and called the Weiss’s home phone. Though Edward’s wife Sandy and she had never

really hit it off, Lauren feared for Edward, her and their daughter. A woman answered the phone in sepulcher-like whisper. "Hello."

"Sandy?" It had been a while and Lauren wasn't sure if Sandy had answered or not.

"This is her sister, Amy. Can I help you?"

"This is Lauren Collins. I needed to—"

"Lauren. Yes, I remember. Your husband is one of Edward's closest friends. God, I have some awful news. Edward was murdered last night. He apparently walked in on a burglar and the bastard beat him to death with a golf club. They found him this morning when he didn't show up for an important closing. Sandy is on her way back from California now."

"Dear God." Lauren had to reach deep for her voice. The horrendous pounding of her heart created a deafening roar in her ears.

"I know. I'll tell Sandy you called and we'll be in touch with you about funeral arrangements. I'm sure she'll want Bill and the others to be part of the funeral."

Lauren wasn't sure what her strangled reply was, but it must not have been that Bill and Thomas were dead because Amy hung up the phone. Lauren sat there staring at the trees and mail boxes whizzing by. Suddenly the car bumped and she was slung to the right as Jack whipped into the parking lot of a mom and pop bait and tackle store. While she'd sat stunned he'd exited the residential area where Thomas lived and had reached the main road that would lead them to Interstate 85.

Jack took his phone from her numb fingers and latched onto her hand. As hot as his was, hers must have been like ice. He pressed her hand between both of his. "Tell me."

Lauren sucked in a deep breath, realizing she hadn't even been able to breathe. Spots wavered before her eyes and she practically reeled in the seat. "Edward was murdered last night. Clubbed to death in his own home. His sister-in-law says it was a burglar, but, Dear God, Jack that's too coincidental. Who's next? My children? What would have happened to us if you hadn't shown up yesterday?" Lauren shuddered hard.

"Come here." He pulled her across the console and wrapped his arms around her. He held her against his chest, his voice a deep rumble as he spoke. "Don't let yourself go back and worry over it. I was there, that's all that matters." He was warm and solid, so very real and assured as he hugged her closer that her careening world stabilize a little. She inhaled again, drinking in his scent, already finding comfort in its familiarity amid the surreal macabre world surrounding her. "I'm not going to let anything happen to Matt, Mitch, you or Angie, okay? So wipe that worry out of your mind. What we need to focus on is moving forward. We need to call the rest of Bill's friends. Warn them. Find out what they know, then we need to sit down and try again to figure out what in the hell is going on, okay?"

He brushed his fingers along her cheek and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. His gentle touch and soothing manner were at odds with his rough soldier persona, but she didn't mention it. She could tell he was totally into her, into comforting her, and easing her fears and it was because he truly cared about her.

He wasn't condemning or judgmental, although she was sure he knew death and danger on a level she couldn't even imagine. There hadn't been a lick of sexual anything in his embrace either. He'd reached out human to human to comfort her and she was sorry to say that was something she'd never gotten in her marriage. Why did the man think he sucked at relationships?

Before she could say what was on her mind, he spoke. "Don't look at me like that, Lauren. I'm no hero."

She didn't argue with him at the moment, but did wonder why he was so down on himself, so uncomfortable with the truth. She eased back to her side of the car. "I need to call the others."

He handed her the phone again. "Tell them that Bill was killed and that both Thomas and Edward have died as well and that you don't think it coincidence. Tell them to get someplace safe and to let you know where so you can meet them. You need to talk to them about Bill."

Lauren nodded. She called Ray in Savannah, Georgia, and left a message on his answering machine to contact her immediately. That he might be in danger. The same with Bob in Tampa, Florida. Conrad in South Carolina picked up after the first ring. "Thank God, you answered," she said. "This is Lauren. Bill's wife."

"Yes, I know. I was just about to call you. I am so sorry. The news about Bill from Sao Paulo just reached me, I can't believe it. Where are you? I'll come and help."

"No. Listen, Conrad. Something very wrong and very bad is going on. Edward was murdered in his home last night. They say a burglar. I think Thomas is dead too. A fall, maybe. But I don't think their deaths were coincidental or accidental either. You need to get someplace safe fast and we need to talk about Bill. I'll come to you, okay?"

"Thomas? Edward? Dear God. I can't believe this. You're really scaring me, Lauren. What in the hell is going on?"

"I don't know. Maybe we can figure this out together. I'll be at Lake Hartwell in a little over an hour and a half. Give me your address and please be careful." She'd added a few minutes for traffic and so they'd have time to call the authorities about Thomas.

"I will." Conrad then rattled off his address and Lauren wrote it down with the paper and pen Jack produced. "Call me when you get here." Conrad hung up before she could say anything else.

She ended the call and frowned. The man had sounded more rushed than worried. Shrugging off the thought, she turned to Jack only to find him studying her.

"What did the man say to make you frown?"

"Nothing really. He was shocked at the news, but then didn't ask many questions. He sounded rushed. Probably was in a hurry to get someplace safe. It won't take us long to get there. It's a straight shot up Interstate 85."

“Good. There’s a pay phone at the front of the store. I’m going to give the cops an anonymous tip about Thomas and we’ll hit the road. You stay here. I don’t want you on the surveillance camera if they’ve got one on.”

“Why?”

“We don’t know exactly what Bill’s involvement in the Lebanon situation was, but his friends are dropping like flies. I’d rather there not be any concrete evidence connecting you to their deaths.”

“For my safety?”

“Yes, and because someone might try and say you had a hand in the murders.”

“That’s insane.”

“I learned a long time ago that when it comes to crap like yesterday and today nothing is impossible.” Jack reached into the back seat. He dug an oversized black windbreaker and a red baseball cap from his backpack. Within sixty seconds he was barely recognizable. The hooded windbreaker shadowed his face and concealed his short hair. Then he’d buckled his jeans about his upper thighs, leaving a hint of blue boxers to show between the jacket hem and the top of his pants. The major slouch he achieved as he stood from the car cut several inches off his height and put him among the notorious ranks of rappers and hip-hop teens worldwide. The way he sauntered to the pay phone should have won the man an Oscar. To the casual eye, he looked exactly in character. Even held a hand to his ear as if listening to a jiving tune as he bounced while dialing the phone. He made a return performance and they were on their way. Lauren didn’t have a clue what she would say to Conrad when they reached Hartwell. Just exactly how did she say her husband was a terrorist, and by the way are you one too?

Conrad danced a little jig as he hung up the phone, making his motor boat rock. Talk about luck. A genuine, juicy, Georgia peach was about to fall into his lap. A five-million-dollar one to boot. Surely by putting her letter with the three he now had, he’d be able to figure out Bill’s code. Edward’s letter really didn’t reveal much. The man hadn’t necessarily died in vain, but the clue hadn’t been all that hot.

There once was a king. He died on a throne. In his land of Grace, did the whole world mourn.

Damn. He didn’t have any more time to think about it now. He had some major shit to accomplish before Lauren arrived. He’d had all night to think and plan. He had done some planning, really he had, even though he’d relived—several times—every bloody, glorious moment of Edward’s demise. He’d come to the conclusion that the best way to move forward was to kill himself and then go after the other letters and frame either Bob or Ray for the deaths of Edward, Thomas and his own. Having Lauren arrive only sweetened the pot. He’d off himself before she arrived and then kidnap her when she got here. The perfect crime.

He was already on his boat, having calls to his house phone forwarded to his cell. He had to finish rigging the engine to explode and get his scuba equipment ready. After that, he'd wait for the right moment to create the spectacle. His boat would blow to smithereens and a short time later Lauren Collins would disappear forever.

It would go into the cold case annals as being the most unsolvable mystery of the century. His palms grew damp and his dick swelled with anticipation. Oh the things he would do to her. The ways he'd use her. He'd leave no fantasy unfulfilled. And he'd built up quite a few of them watching porn over the years.

The accident with Thomas had truly freed him, let the inner man come out and rule.

"Sex slave," he whispered, just to hear the words out loud. He shivered with another wave of excitement. No more lonely nights jerking off to computer smut. He'd have the real thing for as long as he wanted it. He'd have five million. He could go anywhere and be anybody. This time he'd turn the tables and take life by the balls instead of it being the other way around as it has always been. He couldn't wait.

Of course, she'd have that muscle with her, the man with the gun who was keeping her out of the clutches of the shooter at her house. Conrad would just have to prepare a little surprise for him. Something that would leave him Tango Uniform as they phrased it. Good old jargon for tits up or, as his grandpap used to say, dead as a door nail.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Fayetteville, North Carolina

1000 hours

Roger paced and the nurses running up and down the hospital hallway gave him a wide berth. He not only felt like hell, but he was pretty sure he looked it too. Beck hadn't answered his phone despite the numerous calls Roger had made over the last few hours, and Roger had reached the point where he was going to have to let the brass and his cousin Paul, the President, know. They had to be made aware of Beck's state of mind. That Roger had yet to inform them of Beck's instability was unforgivable, but Roger had found himself between a rock and a hard spot. He had the responsibility of taking care of his men. That meant cutting Beck some slack when dealing with shit that Roger himself was struggling to handle.

If he took the human element out of being a commander then his men would lose heart for the team. Courage, loyalty, perseverance, everything that made a soldier stand true in the most hellish of battles came from the heart. He was keeper of their hearts and he'd failed miserably since Lebanon. His only hope was that they'd get through this. That his men would heal and they'd once again regain their solidarity for the team. Restoring the same respect that he'd had before wouldn't happen but he didn't necessarily deserve it now.

His phone vibrated and he read the text. It was from Beck. *Gag order still in place. No guarantees though. In DC for the day.*

The man's destination had Roger biting another bullet. Since DT was in Georgia that left only Pecos for Beck to visit at Walter Reed. Pecos who had been blinded in the explosion. One minute in the company of his wounded men and Roger himself was screaming inside to be honest with them. Just exactly what shape was Beck going to be in when he got back?

But as Beck was on leave there wasn't a damn thing Roger could do to stop him.

Which meant he had no more excuses to avoid Mari.

His cell rang and Officer Cain's number showed on the screen. Hopefully there was good news. As in the madman after Mari was dead.

"Weston here."

"Lt. Col., I think we may be on to something. Unfortunately, it's bad news."

"What do you mean?"

“We ran the name Dugar through the system along with Mari’s description of the man and if we’re right then the situation is serious. Ever hear of Frank Dugar?”

“It’s not ringing a bell.”

“Extremist. Part of the Washington Viper Militia the FBI took down two years ago.”

“The group behind the Vigilante Bombings?” The knot in Roger’s gut was practically suffocating. The Viper Militia had set themselves up as America’s judge. They were suspected of bombing abortion clinics, burning migrant camps and health departments for aiding and abetting illegal aliens, and assassinating several local judges and city officials for crimes against America when court cases or legislature didn’t line up with their philosophy. The FBI had raided their camp. Most of the militia had died when a cache of explosives had detonated during the gunfight. Several of the extremists, though, had escaped over the border into Canada and had disappeared.

“That’s right. Before hooking up with the Viper Militia, Dugar spent most of his life either in jail or in mental institutions. His last conviction was for aggravated assault. Nearly beat a man to death over a traffic dispute, but the judge went light on the sentencing because the other man pulled a gun on Dugar first. Sucker missed the shot and Dugar didn’t give him another chance. Stay alert and let me know if you see anything suspicious.”

“Will do.” Roger disconnected then looked up to see Dr. Stewart exit Mari’s room and it startled him. He must have been so absorbed in the conversation that he’d missed the doc going in. It could very well have been Dugar .

Kicking his own ass, Roger greeted the woman then asked about Mari. “So what’s the prognosis?”

“Good. The cramping is gone. Her blood levels are okay. The baby is fine as far as any tests can determine this early in her pregnancy. She can go home, but I am going to preface that by saying she absolutely must get into a prenatal care program and she must start eating properly. She’s going to need some help functioning with both her hands bandaged and the cuts on her knees are going to make walking painful, but she needs to get up and walk about the house every few hours until she is ready to venture out.”

“I’ll see that she does all of the above, Doc.”

“Good. Here’s my card. She needs to set up an appointment in about a week for her stitches to come out. The nurse will give both of you Mari’s home care instructions before you go.” The doctor glanced at Mari’s closed door and lowered her voice. “Two other things, she refuses to take anything for pain, afraid that it will harm the baby. I’m sending a prescription home with her, but if she won’t take that perhaps she’ll take Tylenol. Also, I think it would be good for her to see a counselor, one who deals with victims of violent crime. Mari may not have been seriously hurt in the attack, but emotionally she is very traumatized.”

“I’d already thought of getting her into counseling. She’s been through—a lot.” Roger then clamped his mouth shut. Mari had been through a lot and he was the man responsible for it. Thanking the doctor

again, Roger stepped into the room and braced himself for the impact Mari had on everything about him. Emotionally and physically the sight of her delivered a one-two punch that had him reeling in his boots.

It didn't make a damn bit of sense and had to be a mixture of his guilt and his long-starved libido. There wasn't a thing about her that didn't prey on his mind. He hadn't seen her gloriously long hair since the grocery mart's bathroom yesterday, but he could remember every nuance of the blue-black curtain. Her golden eyes were rich and perfectly framed by thick lashes. She'd been given a traditional Muslim headscarf and gown this morning and she hadn't wasted a second before putting them on. The hospital employees had asked around after her admission last night, and had located the clothes for her to wear. He supposed he should have done that for her, but then, burying her beauty under a mound of clothing hadn't been uppermost in his mind. Keeping her safe from being buried six feet under had.

An hour later Mari was discharged from the hospital and he'd driven his car to the front pick-up area for her. The nurse brought her out in a wheelchair. There were other patients loading to go home and he winced as he saw the numerous bouquets of flowers accompanying them. Something else he'd neglected to do. Exiting the SUV, he left it running and moved around the car to help Mari.

"It's a beautiful day." She gave him a tight smile. One that didn't hide her painful grimace as she moved her legs to stand and used her elbows to try and push herself upright. He gritted his teeth for half a second and then couldn't take it anymore.

"Too pretty a day to hurt. Let me help and we can work on the moving around bit a little later." He scooped her quickly off her feet and into his arms. The nurse moved to open his car door and all hell broke out. The wheelchair Mari had been in seconds ago flipped over backwards as a high caliber bullet plowed through its vinyl back and shattered the plate glass window fronting the hospital behind them.

"Get down!" Roger yelled, crouching low, using his SUV for cover as he scanned the direction he thought the shooter might be. A nearby security guard drew his weapon and started shouting and pushing people down for cover. One lady ran screaming by him and Roger knocked her down to the ground behind a cement pillar. She lay there crying, but at least she was alive.

Another bullet ricocheted off the cement sidewalk less than a foot from where he held Mari. Roger had no choice but to get the hell out of there. Everyone else would be safer too. He had no doubt that Dugar, the crazy SOB after Mari, was on the other end of that rifle. The adrenaline, rage and fear pumping through him was unlike anything he'd ever known. He felt as if he would explode from the nuclear mix. Especially when he saw Mari's pale face. She looked as if death had already claimed her and she was prepared to leave this world behind.

Over his dead body and damned soul! Neither of which were going to happen, so that meant nothing was getting to her EVER.

Lunging forward, he placed her on the floorboard then dove over the top of her for the driver's seat. The car's engine was already running, so all he had to do was shove the car into drive and steer. He did that

and managed to stomp on the gas pedal. Within seconds, he sailed down the pick-up lane. The driver's side back window exploded before he could turn the corner and Mari cried out as she huddled on the floor. He'd expected her to cry out for help, but she wasn't. She kept asking for forgiveness.

He filed the fact and drove like a bat out of hell.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Fair Play, South Carolina

1200 hours

Jack crossed the state line from Georgia into South Carolina before he realized it. He'd been deliberating how to best approach Conrad Gardner and had decided that a public restaurant would be their best option. He pulled into the parking lot of Pig Out's BBQ. According to his GPS they were less than five miles from Gardner's house.

Lauren had called her kids and Angie a few minutes ago to check with them and was still on the phone. He could hear the boys' exuberance now that he'd killed the engine even without the speaker phone on. With Rico on lookout for Angie and the kids, Jack could relax a notch. Unless one of them made the mistake of communicating their location to someone else and the people after them overheard it—something he was positive the bastards were capable of—no one would be able to reach Lauren's children. It was her he had to worry about.

"Yeah, Matt. I give you my solid oak. We'll go to Disney World soon. I love you. Now let me talk to Aunt Angie."

"Sorry about that," Angie said. "I didn't think letting them watch the travel channel would lead to any trouble. You're likely to be out a couple of grand now."

"That's why I stick to Thomas the Tank Engine." Lauren laughed.

Jack's insides reacted to the sound. It made him tense, made him yearn. Not in a sexual way, but in an excited about life way, reminding him of the times when Livy was six and she threw herself into his arms when he walked in the door. He would swing her around until they were both dizzy and laughing. Back then it didn't matter if he'd been gone for a month or just the day, she was always happy to see him. He missed it more than he'd realized.

"We did that first, but James and Henry had a spat in the episode. And, well, Matt thought James was in the right and Mitch thought Henry could do no wrong and World War Three ensued."

Jack laughed at that and shook his head. Lauren just rolled her eyes. "Well, whatever you do, don't resort to anything remotely to do with martial arts. The room won't survive it. There's always the classical music channel."

"Will do. Just be careful, okay?"

"I will. Jack wants to talk to Rico again." Lauren handed over the phone.

At the beginning of the call Jack had let Rico know about the two murders and that they were on their way to see another of Bill's friends. Rico spoke first. "Be pissed later, but I called Beck to come help. He didn't answer so I left him a message. I don't know what's going on with that boy but we need to find out. Until you know what this is all about, I would feel better having a back up in this situation."

Jack exhaled, really not sure if he could count on Beck anymore. Two weeks ago, Jack would have put his life and soul in the man's hands. Now he couldn't even get a return phone call. "It can't hurt," Jack finally said. "That's if he picks up his message. Expect to hear from us at 1800 hours."

"1800 it is. Be careful, DT. I'm not liking any of this and you're still on the mend."

"Roger that." Jack hung up then toggled the phone to Gardner's number and pressed the call button. He gave Lauren the phone. "Tell him you're alone and have him meet you here."

She nodded, sliding the phone up to her ear. After multiple rings it went to voice mail and she left Conrad a message to meet her at the Pig Out's BBQ then disconnected. She immediately called again. Still no answer. A sick feeling gripped her stomach. She'd foolishly thought that by giving Conrad warning about Thomas and Edward he would then be safe. "What do we do now? Call the police?"

"Not yet. Not until we have something concrete to report. It could be a cell reception problem. He could be on the other line and will call us back." Jack gripped the steering wheel. "Why don't we go inside, order food, wait ten minutes and call again."

"I don't think I can eat. I'm sick that something may have happened to him too."

"Give it a few minutes. We made good time getting here, so he may not have expected us so soon. And you need to eat a Power Bar or something to stay sharp. Adrenaline and stress will bottom out your blood sugar. If we don't hear from him soon, I'll leave you here and go check out the situation."

Lauren shook her head. "Sorry. That's not going to happen."

Jack almost laughed. He had the experience and he was getting lip over a perfectly reasonable suggestion. He folded his arms and leaned back, lifting a challenging brow. "It's not?"

She cleared her throat, and set her full lips into a determined line. The woman had grit. He had to give her credit for that.

"I just can't see you leaving me here without any means of quick transportation and you going alone into a potentially dangerous situation, miles away. Whether you like it or not, I am your back up in this, which makes your suggestion unworkable." She sat back and folded her arms, mirroring the invisible line he'd drawn in the sand.

Damn. He didn't want to admit it but she did have a slight point. Still, he just couldn't see taking her with him to Gardner's house. "You have to believe me. My going in alone will be a lot safer for both of us."

"I get that. But why do I have to be stranded miles away?"

"What do you suggest?"

“Why don’t I drop you off close to Gardner’s house and then wait some place nearby that we both feel is safe. That way I can either get to you or you can make it back to me faster if there is a problem.”

Well double damn. She made sense. She also pointed out a fatal flaw in their situation that he needed to amend immediately. He started the engine.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the Walmart we passed to buy disposable phones. If you’re going to be my back up then we have to do it right.”

“That’s it?” she asked, eyes wide with surprise. “You’re the expert here. I’m completely out of my element and you’re going with my suggestion without any ‘you don’t know jack’ comments?”

“I’m Jack and you know me.” He grinned. “But seriously. Your plan has merit, and it’s not like you’re asking to play Rambo. Waiting at a closer place with transportation makes sense. My hardly-ever-wrong self can take advice sometimes.” He grinned again and she rolled her eyes. “Why so stunned?”

She shrugged and then averted her gaze, but not before he saw the shadows in her baby blues. “Not used to...never mind. It’s not important.”

Jack knew men who counted everything around them as being worthless. Collins obviously hadn’t valued her. Jack reached for her hand and squeezed. “Collins was a fool.”

“Yeah.”

“Then it would be a dumb idea to let his opinion of anything matter to you anymore, if it ever should have to begin with.”

She laughed and squeezed back. “You’re right. By the way, you don’t suck at relating.”

The grim disgust Jack had for Collins’s character was replaced by his own self hatred. He shook his head, wondering what she would say when she found out Collins’s blood was on his hands. He went to pull his hand away but she held on. “Just because I am capable of basic respect for another individual doesn’t mean—”

“Yeah, it does.” She looked him dead in the eye and gave him no room to argue.

It was all he could do to back out of the parking spot and drive. The urge to pull her into his arms and to kiss the shadows from her eyes was overwhelming. As it was, he couldn’t stop himself from leaving his hand in hers. Somehow, he needed the contact as much as he sensed she did at the moment.

Jack wasn’t sure what happened but something between them had changed, shifted, moved in such a way that part of himself molded to her. And that change made his need to kiss her and bury himself inside of her just that much stronger.

He’d started out this mission in a bad position. That had now worsened and he had no idea what in the hell he was going to do about it. For now, he had to focus on keeping everyone alive and figuring out what sort of hell Bill Collins had brought down on his family. After that the hard part would come. Then he’d have to deal with the collateral damage telling her the truth would bring.

Part of Lauren felt like a total idiot. Her emotions were stretched taut and on a razor's edge, making her a bit more sensitive than she should be, a vulnerability that kept revealing to Jack things about herself that she hated. Low confidence being one. Her relationship with Bill being another. It was one thing to screw up choosing a partner in life and having your best friend know demeaning details. It was another thing to have a guy figure them out.

Her lack of judgment in character was a major flaw in herself. She'd like to think that Bill had been the consummate actor who didn't reveal himself until the twins were born. She didn't want to think she'd been so desperate to be loved that she'd blinded herself to his real character. However things had started, she eventually found out that relationships and life could get complicated really fast and leave a person with no good choices to make, only bad ones or worse ones. With Matt and Mitch on board, her sons' wellbeing had taken precedence over her personal happiness until Bill's behavior began to affect them adversely. At that point she'd filed for divorce.

She and Jack didn't waste time. Within twenty minutes they had the cell phones up and running and had downed a couple of Power Bars and a drink, which did ease the burning in her stomach a little if not her worry. Their third and fourth attempt at reaching Conrad Gardner had failed and Lauren dropped Jack off a block from Gardner's address. He would call her as soon as he reached Gardner's house and report on his findings. She drove the half mile to the recreation center of Lake Hartwell State Park.

The summer day only had a hint of breeze to it, but the heat didn't stop avid boaters from enjoying the sparkling blue-green lake nested along the Appalachian foothills. Soon fall would paint the lush vegetation a multitude of colors, leaving patches of gold and orange amid the evergreen pines. For now, everything was thick and green and steamy.

As soon as she entered the park, she knew something was up. Everyone at the beach-marina complex was lined up on the shore staring out at the lake rather than going about their recreational activities. Police were there, several DNR trucks, an ambulance and the fire department too. She was afraid that what was happening here was tied to everything else.

The smell of smoke hit Lauren the moment she opened her car.

Jack's instructions had been to wait in the car at the populated marina with the engine running, the doors locked and her windows up. On the off chance that anyone approached the car, Jack had told her to drive away and to call him. Now she hesitated on what to do next. It seemed really dumb that she couldn't walk twenty yards in a public place with a number of people around to find out what had everyone's attention. But then, she'd promised Jack that she'd do as he directed and she'd already compromised her word.

Bottom lip caught between her teeth, she got back into the car, locked the doors and turned on the engine. After scanning the area carefully, she called Jack.

“What?” he answered in a low whisper that tingled in her ear and had her mentally smacking herself. Was there no part of her he didn’t stroke?

“Something’s going on,” she told him. “Police and rescue are at the marina, and everyone is lined along the shore, looking out at the lake. I’m going to find out what.”

Jack exhaled. “Fine. Keep me on the phone. I have Gardner’s house trailer in sight, but have yet to move in. For a security guru he doesn’t live high on the hog and he’s got zilch protecting his own home.”

Lauren frowned. “That’s odd. I always thought he lived in a big estate house like the others. Maybe this address is a family member’s. His grandfather owned a lot of property off the lake.”

“Maybe. So far everything on the perimeter check appears normal, but my gut is screaming.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m not liking the situation at all and even less now that you’ve called. Find out what’s up.”

“Okay. Hold on.” Lauren had parked as close as she could to the crowd and was quickly able to reach the lakeshore. What had everybody enthralled was immediately obvious. The smoldering hull of a boat rocked on the water not too far from the shore. It looked as if it was being kept afloat by ropes tethered to the surrounding rescue boats.

“What happened?” she asked the group of boys next to her. They all carried skateboards and sported low-slung shorts, Billabong tees and spiky hair cuts.

“It was like a movie, man. The dude’s boat blew up.”

“Yeah. Smack was in the middle of a tight trick on the steps over there when whammo.”

“We all hit the deck. Pieces of the boat flew way up into the air.”

“It was rad. Shame too. They’re looking for the man’s body. Heard somebody say the dude was a football legend or something like that.”

“Thanks.” Lauren reeled as the blood drained from her head. It had to be Conrad. He’d probably gone to his boat, thinking he’d be safe on it. She turned away and put the phone to her ear. “Jack, we’re too late—”

“I heard. Get in the car and head this way. Once you’re rolling I’ll hang up and check the house. Do not come up his drive until I call and give you the okay.”

Conrad glared at his watch. Sweat trickled down his back and his chin. Still wet from the lake, he’d stuffed himself up in the storage area above the rafters of his carport and it was hot in the airless space. It gave him a clear view of the front door of his trailer and set him up for the perfect shot, though, so he wasn’t about to abandon it. Once Lauren and her muscle showed, he’d nail the guy with his rifle and get her, then maybe torch his place to say good-bye to all of the shit that had tried to bury him all of his life.

Lauren had better hurry, though. He only had so much time before the authorities would likely appear, looking for someone to tell about his untimely demise. He was thinking he'd have to be gone by then, but maybe not. Maybe he could tie her to his bed and be enjoying her while the cops knocked on his door.

The thought had his heart racing with excitement. Doing her like that right under their noses with her dead muscle stuffed under the porch they were standing on. He practically laughed out loud. Who'd have known how much fun being his inner self could be? He glanced at his watch again.

Damn. It had been a good thirty to forty minutes since Lauren had tried to call him. Surely, she'd come looking for him, all worried about Bill's bud and—

Tires crunched gravel. Someone was coming up his driveway. He could see Lauren in the driver's seat as she turned the car around and faced back down the drive. She was alone. He couldn't believe it. This was going to be a piece of cake with ass as a reward. He set down his rifle, about drop from his hiding place when a man exited from *his house*!

What the hell?

Conrad squinted and stared hard, reaching for his rifle. How had the SOB gotten inside without Conrad having a clue? It was Lauren's muscle. The man reached the steps and motioned her inside, clearly expecting her arrival. Had she sent the guy to kill him? Was she scheming to have the five million all to herself?

They went back inside his house before he could get the rifle in place.

After sitting stunned for a moment, he settled back into place, ready to nail the guy when he walked out the door.

Lauren didn't know why but her skin crawled as she navigated Conrad Gardner's drive. So much so that she swung the car around and pointed it back down the drive. Somehow the shadows lurking beyond the surrounding net of trees made her feel almost trapped. It didn't make sense. She'd grown up rural and was more accustomed to isolated areas than most people who lived in the city. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the few times she'd interacted with Conrad, she'd always gotten the impression he was much more affluent than the scrubby drive and run down trailer indicated.

Not that she was a snob. She'd grown up on the side of the have-nots. She supposed it had more to do with finding out one more thing that she believed was in fact false. The ill thoughts made her feel even worse. Good God, the man could be lying in a watery grave right that second and she was questioning his social status. Maybe she had become a snob.

Jack met her on the porch. Once glance at his strained expression and his constant scanning of their surroundings told her he was ill at ease too.

"I've tried to call Bob and Ray again and got no answer. Do you think they're dead too? I can't take any more of this." Half of her wanted to say to hell with finding out what Conrad might know about Bill.

She and Jack just needed to get the hell out of there and do what? Sit in a hotel room until someone hunted her and her sons down? That didn't sit well with her. And until they had feedback from the information Jack had given his commander, she really didn't see another option.

"I don't know, Lauren. If you had said to me yesterday that I'd still be this much in the dark about Bill's activities, I never would have believed you. I'm sorry, but here may be our only chance to search for clues."

"I know. Just ignore me."

"No, you're right. Brace yourself," he told her before he opened Conrad's front door. Her jaw snapped open and she was sure she would have swooned from the stench alone had Jack not had a grip on her arm.

"Oh my God."

"Can't see where God could possibly have a hand in this death trap," Jack said. "I had hoped that you knew Gardner well enough to be able to see a clue in this mess."

Lauren shook her head. "This is just beyond comprehension. The man has to have been seriously ill."

"A hoarder. I've heard of them before, but had never really seen it manifested. It gets worse the farther back you go. Since we're looking for a letter, I suggest we start with the kitchen area. From the empty envelopes in there, Gardner must have opened his mail during mealtime."

Jack led Lauren through the sorry rooms to the kitchen and dining area. Even before she arrived, he wondered if they were just wasting their time. Finding anything here would be a miracle. He'd seen hovels all over the world and nothing seemed to match Gardner's place in terms of years of junk just laying everywhere. Even the ground surrounding the back porch of the trailer was knee deep in the plastic containers, the kind the microwavable dinners came in. Mixed with those had been buckets of dirty engine oil, overflowing with water and scum. Recreational paraphernalia was spilled from an attached storage shed where expensive water skis, scuba tanks, gear and a top brand set of forged golfing irons lay scattered about, and all of it beaded with water—a waste of quality equipment that didn't match the rundown, low-income hovel. There'd been a puddle of water on the back porch he'd had to step over so as not to leave any prints. And after seeing the inside, he wondered if it really was water or if Gardner had tossed some other liquid out the back door before leaving the house. He'd seen no evidence of rain on the terrain he'd covered coming to Gardner's.

The front porch had been a surprise as well as the carport. No clutter there.

He wished that were true for the kitchen and dining area. Mail and things from tool sets to bar soap were piled amid dirty dishes on every surface without any apparent order to the overwhelming volume of junk. Another year or two and Jack doubted there would be a navigable path through the place. The place was a health and fire hazard.

Lauren was a trooper. She didn't murmur a word of complaint as she searched. After a bit, he looked up at her. "I hate to say this. But if Conrad Gardner was blown up on his boat today, he is better off dead than living like this. Hell, it doesn't even look as if he has thrown anything out in a long time."

"If ever," Lauren added. "I know for sure Bill and the others never knew Conrad lived like this. None of them would have associated with him in any way if they had. Not even to help him. They'd have dropped him cold if they knew."

"Given the degree of illness here, it was a wonder he hid it from them. I'm not sure what I would do if I found a friend was as messed up as this. But do you really think it would be as bad as you say? You do charity work, didn't Bill or his friends contribute?"

"Sure they dumped money into things, which isn't something to be denigrated. Funding is essential. I raise money to help cover the cost of having and raising a premature baby. I just know that Bill and the others would have never tolerated or understood this level of illness— Hey, there's a FedEx envelope on the floor over by the refrigerator."

Being closer, Jack picked it up from the pieces of a broken coffee cup. "It's empty and it's from Brazil."

"Which only confirms what we suspected. Bill's girlfriend mailed things to Bill's college buddies."

"I hate to say this, but Brazil looks to be the next ticket."

Lauren's expression changed and he suddenly realized what it would mean for him to follow Bill's trail to Brazil. He'd have to leave her, and that sat the wrong way in his gut as well as heavily on his shoulders. Damn.

"Can't say that you're wrong." Her voice was thick with the fear he saw in her eyes. "Though the woman didn't know why Bill was missing or where he was, she did know enough to be worried about him. And he had to have seen her after leaving here. Otherwise, he would have left the packages for his housekeeper to mail."

"Let's go." Jack didn't see the point of wasting any more time here. "Finding any clues in this mess will take a team of investigators months."

"You're right." She sighed.

Jack moved ahead of Lauren to the front door, checked the area out then slipped onto the porch. He was unable to shake the feeling nagging his gut. Conrad's whole set up revealed a somewhat unbalanced psyche. It surprised him to see how neat the front porch was as opposed to the back, the way he'd entered the trailer. The woods beyond the rock driveway were heavy with brush, which had hindered him when he'd circled the perimeter of the mobile home. It wasn't surprising to see the man didn't believe in yard work. No landscaping or grass covered the ground, only gravel, pine needles and scrub. Jack noted the empty double carport to his right. The place was roofed and had one wall, where hooks held ropes and life jackets for boating. Grease spots dotted one side of the concrete floor and a puddle of water as well. Odd.

From Conrad's boat maybe? Apparently he'd left here not too long before Jack arrived otherwise the day's heat would have evaporated...

He frowned and fisted his hands, feeling as frustrated with his current situation as he did with his flashbacks to Lebanon.

With Lauren before him, they moved down the steps to the car. He opened the driver's door. She reached in for her purse that she'd left on the seat. Then looked up at him. "You're serious about going to Brazil?"

"I think I'll call her first, see what she says, how she reacts to my questions, okay."

Lauren nodded, her relief evident.

Suddenly pain stabbed a hot dagger into his brain follow by a loud pop. The bullet plowing into his skull had come out of nowhere. His knees buckled and a dark tunnel swallowed him alive. "Lauren," he cried out, reaching for her through a dark mist. He thrust his weapon into her hand as he went down, doing his best to push her back into the car and cover her with his body. His last thought was of her, want of her, need of her, fear for her. Fear for what would happen to her without him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mari couldn't seem to stop the tears. From her cramped huddle on the floorboard, she cried for Neil and she cried for her unborn baby, certain she would never be able to hold him in her arms. Never see his sweet smile or suckle him at her breast. Never be able to love him, sing to him or watch him grow into an honorable man. It seemed Allah had decided on her death and she had no idea when and where her execution would be, only that it would come. What else was she to believe?

Anyone around her was in danger. People at the hospital had been hurt and Mr. Weston...Roger...he'd missed getting shot by seconds. The bullet meant for her would have killed them both. She'd seen the gore and the harsh realities of war and death in her village among those less fortunate than her family. With her father being a very important person among the ruling religious leaders, she and her sisters had been somewhat protected.

But not always. The men who had attacked her had hated her father.

Her body screamed at her to escape, but she couldn't seem to move, too afraid that the man with the gun would try and shoot her again and this time succeed in killing her baby or Roger. That brought more tears streaming from her eyes. Visions of Roger, memories of Neil, and the horrors of her shame all jumbled together in her mind, leaving her in a very dark place where time and anything good in life abandoned her.

"Mari, you're safe now. Do you understand?" Roger had stopped the car. He now was next to her. He grabbed her shoulders, pulling her toward him. "We're just outside Fort Bragg and need to go through security. I need you to sit up on the seat. Please, look at me. I am so sorry I let this happen. God, can you forgive me?"

Mari looked up to find Roger's face only inches from hers. He had crouched down on the ground outside and leaned in through the passenger's doorway to reach her. A deadly grimness had consumed his rugged features. She touched his roughly stubbled cheek with her icy hand. "Not your fault. It's mine. I hurt the man."

"No." Roger looked even fiercer. "It isn't your fault. You have to believe me."

She shook her head. Roger wouldn't be able to understand unless she told him of her sin before. Of the men who had used her. She had been violated, taken by force, but apparently that didn't change the fact that she was now impure. She thought it had, had believed Neil, but now that Allah had taken him away,

now that an executioner hid in the shadows, she couldn't believe any more. But she couldn't tell Roger all of that. She just couldn't.

"Damn it. The man is evil, and you aren't responsible for evil being in this world are you? Were you around at the very beginning of time and brought that horror upon mankind?"

Mari sucked in air, shocked at Roger's question and forced herself to answer. "No, but—"

"There are no buts. Evil exists and evil preys upon the good. You aren't responsible for its existence nor are you responsible for its manifestations, unless you choose to become evil yourself. Understand?"

She blinked and found herself nodding, surprised that he made sense. Then he did something that wiped everything from her mind. He kissed her tears on her cheeks and pressed his forehead to hers. "I won't let it happen again, Mari. I promise. That man's evil will never touch your life again. I vow my life on it."

She grasped his arms, feeling the tense bulge of his muscles and the strength and rage teeming within him. She meant to push him away from her. His life? He'd vowed his life. She could never let that happen. She had to leave him to protect him. But instead of distancing herself from him she buried herself into the warmth of his embrace.

Shot. Jack had been shot. Lauren saw the barely healed wound on his temple rip open and the bullet whizzed over her head before it clunked into the roof of the car. It all seemed to play out in slow motion right before her eyes and every core emotion she possessed—love, fear, anger, hate—coalesced into a gut wrenching cry. "Jack!" she screamed.

Blood splattered her face and gushed down the side of his head. She grabbed him as he fell and did the only thing she could think of, use all of her weight to shove him farther into the car and out of harm's way. She didn't know how badly he was hurt, and every fiber of her being hurt too. She gasped for air as the world careened around her. Somehow his gun ended up in her hand and she tightened her grip on it.

Dear God! She prayed for a miracle and latched onto the only lifeline she had at the moment—the bullet had grazed his skull rather than bore a hole through his head.

He fell on his side, head in the passenger's seat, the console crushing his ribs, his hips in the driver's seat and his legs sticking out the door. The pistol he'd shoved into her hand was still warm from his skin and bolstered her strength as she crouched behind the car door. Her purse still hung from her arm and swayed with her every movement. She was wedged between the car door and Jack's legs with her heart beating so hard that she thought her chest would split open from the force. Two things consumed her now.

She was damned determined to protect Jack.

And she would kill to do it.

A man dressed in all black and wearing a ski mask dropped into view in the carport. He carried a rifle and stopped to grab some rope draping from a hook on the carport wall before he moved. He didn't seem to be in any hurry and obviously thought she'd be easy pickings. He even shifted his rifle under his arm so he could loop the rope as if preparing a special knot just for her.

She shivered hard and aimed the gun at him, using both hands to hold it. Her body shook from head to toe, making it hard to focus and steady the pistol, but she knew enough to keep the gun out of sight as she concealed herself behind the car door. The man didn't know she was armed, which increased her odds of getting herself and Jack out alive. Instinctively, she waited for him to come closer, knowing her chances of hitting him with a bullet would be greater.

Surely she could aim, pull the trigger and kill the man. She gulped for air, her hands sweaty, her skin freezing.

"I'm calling the police," she yelled, voice warbling with fear. She would have been on the cell phone already if it wasn't buried under Jack.

The man didn't hesitate, but kept coming her way, slowly as if relishing every moment. "Go ahead, Sex Slave. Cops can't help you now." His guttural voice cut like a knife. "You're mine for as long as I want."

Sex Slave? It was the last thing Lauren expected to hear. What in the hell? What did this have to do with terrorists and Bill's coded letter? Was this some sort of nightmare that she'd soon awaken from? The wetness of Jack's blood on her face told her it was more real than she could imagine.

Dear God. The man coming after her seemed almost maniacal, as if he belonged in some B-rated horror flick. Still, his manner was more than effective. His complete assurance and total lack of fear for the authorities had her freaking out, despite the lethal gun in her hands.

"Guess what I'm going to be doing to you when the cops arrive at the door, Sex Slave? Your ass was made for my dick." He laughed and her stomach wrenched. He made her feel violated already. She tightened her grip on the pistol, waited a moment longer, then brought it up and took aim. He was too far away to reach her and too close to avoid her. She pulled the trigger several times. The unexpected force of the gun flung her arms upward, and sent her back into the car. The man yelled, falling backward.

She didn't wait to see what would happen next. She sat half on Jack and half on the seat, barely fitting into the car with her head cocked to the side and her knees against the dashboard. She started the engine and shoved the car into drive. The incline of the driveway had them immediately rolling forward toward the street, gaining a momentum that her stomp on the gas pedal fueled faster.

The driver's side door hung open with Jack's legs sticking out from about his lower calf on down. She had to maneuver carefully down the drive, afraid that she'd hit something and crush Jack's feet with the car door. They no sooner hit the road than she heard him groan.

Within seconds of that his body tensed. He'd regained consciousness. "Son of bitch." He grabbed his head. "What in the hell happened?" he sounded, gloriously normal and the relief flooding her made her giddy.

"I could use a little help here." She maneuvered around a sharp curve.

He angled up on his elbow, hindering her ability to drive even more.

"This position is killing me. Pull over." He pressed his palm to the blood welling from his head wound and groaned harder.

"I was lucky to get most of you into the car." She glanced into the rearview mirror. "I don't think he's coming after us. I shot him. Besides, there wasn't a car there, right?" She eased toward the roadside and brought the car to a stop.

"No car," Jack said, succinctly. By the time they untangled and got out of the car, no part of her remained un-touched by him or his effect on her, which only amplified her need to pull him close to her heart and thank God he was alive. She wanted to hold him, to feel his heart beating, to feel the life rippling through his body. But if she touched him at that moment she didn't think she would be able to stop for a long time, she fetched her cell phone from the seat and tried to focus on what they needed to do next.

Jack grabbed some tissues from the console and pressed the wad to his wound to stop the bleeding. He was pale and in obvious pain. She needed to get him medical help and make sure they remained safe. Provided she could get her own thoughts together. Every fiber of her being shook over how close he had come to being killed.

"I'll drive," he said.

She glared at him then pointed to the passenger seat. "You'll sit and you'll do it fast. The man I shot was alone, but he could have a partner nearby, and we aren't wasting precious time arguing over your Superman complex."

He clenched his jaw. "My what?"

"You heard me. Consider yourself kryptonited. Now sit."

He didn't argue, but staggered over to the passenger's side and got in the car. She slid behind the wheel, wiped the blood from her face with a tissue then buckled up and took off.

"Kryptonited?"

"Yeah. And you might as well know right now that I'm taking you to the hospital."

"Absolutely not. No hospital. Just get us to a hotel to rest in and get cleaned up. I'm going to be fine. I've been injured enough times to know if I need medical attention or not and right now I don't, Kryptonited or not."

"But—"

He held up a hand. "If things change, if I start acting odd, get unusually drowsy, or if this headache worsens, then you can take me in, but I think the metal plate the doctors put in two weeks ago absorbed the

brunt of the bullet's force and averted any serious injury. What's more important right now, is you telling me who you shot."

After glancing at him several more times to assure he wasn't delusional, she let the hospital issue go for now. The metal plate in his skull may have just saved his life. A life put on the line because of her. This was no game and she had no idea what she was going to do next. How could she let Jack keep putting himself in danger for her? Yet how could she possibly face this danger alone?

She trembled so badly inside that she could hardly breathe and she desperately needed a place safe from a bullet bolting out of the blue. She punched the gas, heading for the Interstate, and answered Jack's question. "I shot the ski-masked man in black, who wanted me for his Sex Slave. He dropped down from someplace inside the carport after he shot you."

"What?" Jack jerked his head and then groaned miserably. "Jesus, Lauren. How long have I been out? How did you get out of there? Did he—?"

"He didn't get even remotely close to me thanks to you." Lauren told Jack what had happened and how having his pistol saved them both. She pointed to his gun that now rested on the floorboard and he slipped it back into the waistband of his jeans.

"I knew something was off." He cursed at himself. "The ground was dry except for a puddle of water on the back porch and in the carport. But there was so much clutter everywhere that I let the detail slide. The guy you shot, was he wet?"

Lauren frowned, thought back and realized Jack was right. "It's possible, he kinda had the look."

Jack cursed. "What do you want to bet the bastard killed Conrad, set the boat on fire, swam ashore and came here, positioning himself long before I arrived. If he'd been hiding in the woods, I would have picked up on him. Same with the house. He hid where I would least likely look. The rafters of an empty carport."

"Which means he knew we were coming. He knew we were together. And he waited for me to show up before trying to kill you."

"You got it."

Lauren shuddered. "That makes what he said to me worse."

"What?"

"Don't ask. Just know it would have been bad. And none of what he said had anything to do with Bill, but sounded like a seriously crazed rapist stalking me." She looked in her rearview mirror, searching for reassurance. Her heart pounded when she saw a non-descript black sedan approaching, but its turn signal flashed and it made a right. She focused back on the road ahead, unable to avoid the horror of the day.

"You're not going to like this, but I don't think we should go back to where the boys, Angie and Rico are. Not until we figure this out. Someone seems to be a step ahead of us and the farther we are from your children, the safer they are. In fact, they probably need to leave Atlanta."

“You’re right.” Tears stung Lauren’s eyes and her heart ached with both pain and frustration. She was abandoning Matt and Mitch when all she wanted to do was to hold them close and keep them safe at her side, but that might be the most dangerous place for them. She was torn and holding on by a thread.

She listened as Jack called Rico, using her throw-away cell phone in case his had been compromised, and explained what happened at Gardner’s. Jack made light of being shot, but she’d expected he would. He suggested to Rico that Angie and the boys needed to go someplace a little safer and whatever Rico said had Jack frowning. “I don’t know about that. You’re right. You couldn’t ask for better cover, still there are so many people, control over the environment would be toast. I’ll let Angie talk to Lauren.”

Jack handed her the phone. “Angie’s wanting to take the boys to Disney World instead of keeping them cooped up in a hotel room.”

Lauren took the phone, her heart skydiving at the thought of Matt and Mitch traveling hundreds of miles away from her. She had no question over their safety in going to the amusement park. She’d trust Angie with her life. Jack trusted Rico with his. And since she’d entrusted Jack with her life, by default, she could rely on Rico as well. Angie got on and gave her spiel about going to Disney World, a Fairy Godmother treat as she called it and Lauren, heart in her throat, agreed. If she couldn’t be with them, she would much rather know her sons were being distracted by a world of fun than miserable in a hotel room. It still left her feeling hollow and adrift in a stormy sea.

An hour later she didn’t feel any better about the situation. They had tried to call Bob and Ray again with no results. Had something already happened to them? She and Jack checked into a motel south of Fair Play in Lavonia, Georgia. She’d given the clerk a false name and had paid cash for the room. It was as safe as she could get at the moment.

She didn’t draw a deep breath until the room’s door closed and she slipped the security lock on. Jack glanced about but didn’t say anything about the one-room two-bed set up, and she didn’t mention it either. She wasn’t about to leave him alone after being hurt and they didn’t have connecting rooms. He set the pizza they’d collected on the mini-table, dropped his duffle bag, and sat down on the bottom of the closest bed, looking like death warmed over.

She put the first-aid kit on the bathroom sink, the Coke by the pizza, and walked over to Jack, moving in close so she could examine his wound. “Let me see.”

He bent his head and inhaled sharply as if the movement pained him.

She bit her lip, gut knotted that he’d been hurt at all. But in truth, the wound didn’t look as bad as she expected. The gouging scrape started above his right ear and angled toward his forehead, slashing across the previous, vertical scar at his right temple. Once healed, he’d have a permanent cross marking his temple.

"Come in to the bathroom and let me clean you up, then we both can relax," she said past the emotion clogging her throat. What almost happened was still too fresh in her mind for her to be anything but overwhelmed.

"I can do it." He stood, coming so close to her that she had to take a step back. His nostrils flared as he inhaled sharply. He searched her gaze for a moment as if trying to assess her mood.

"So can I, and right now I need to make sure you're all right more than you need to be Mr. Invincible." She marched to the bathroom and pointed to the closed commode, determined to ignore the effects of his close proximity on her senses. "Sit."

The corner of his mouth quirked up as he sat. "What's next? The Terminator?"

"Sponge Bob Square Pants," she said briskly as she turned on the water.

He snorted and winced. "Can we stick with Superman?"

"Depends on how cooperative you are, Dudley Do Right." *More like Studly Do Right.*

He laughed, then groaned. "Okay. You win. Just don't make me laugh again. No more torture."

She opened the first-aid kit and he reached for the Ibuprofen, downing a handful of them before pulling off his stained T-shirt. The bathroom shrank to the size of a pea pod, a very warm pea pod. And the torture had just begun because ignoring him and the effect of his chiseled in stone physique became impossible. His every muscle was perfectly defined, supple and vibrant with life. *Thank God for that.*

This man had put his life on the line for their country numerous times. And he'd put everything on the line for her without question.

Taking the wash cloth, she gently cleansed away the dried blood then dabbed some antibiotic ointment to his wound and left it open to air at his insistence. She turned her attention to cleaning his neck and chest as well, lingering more than she had a right to, but unable to stop herself from relishing every touch. A touch he was clearly far from indifferent to, a reaction that filled her even more with want, with need, with excitement. He seemingly watched her every move with his heated gaze, but then she swore he'd stared at her mouth, her breasts, her sex so long that it was a wonder she didn't burst into flames.

She surprised herself on how quickly she finished, then again, he had a way of warping her perception of time. It could have been five minutes, it could have been fifty, whatever it was, it wasn't enough. She wanted more of him, needed to give more to him in so many ways.

That bullet had shot to hell any barriers or pretensions, leaving a raw need that only he could fill. She slid her palm against his hard-edged jaw and eased his gaze up to hers. His skin had become burning hot, his pulse raced beneath her finger tips, and his respirations had quickened considerably. "Are you sure you don't need the hospital?"

"The hospital is the last thing I need right now." His voice was like sandpaper, made her feel raw, vulnerable and that much more needy. He placed his hand against her hers and turned to brush his lips to the inside of her wrist. The simmering desire between them flared white hot and burned a path all the way

to her core. She shivered with excitement. The connection between them was one that only a near-death incident could forge.

Her mouth went dry and she searched hard for the right thing to say to him. Her heart was so full, her need so great. She met his gaze. “I don’t know that I’ve thanked you enough. For being there yesterday. Today. For keeping my sons safe. For keeping me alive.”

He started to shake his head and she stopped him. “Let me finish. I want to thank you for what you’ve done every day, for the years that you’ve been there doing what has to be done so I can live the life I live. It means more than I can express or ever repay.”

He exhaled. “Lauren, sometimes it’s a job, sometimes it’s more than that. It’s everything I believe. But right now it sure as hell isn’t—”

She pressed her finger to his lips, halting his words. “That being said, I want you to know this has nothing whatsoever to do with gratitude and everything to do with what’s in my heart.” She planted her mouth on his, ready to start this kiss where their kiss last night had ended.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jack groaned, clearly of the same mind, because he kissed her hard, his tongue taking command of hers in a deep search that plunged her into a storm of need. He jerked up the hem of her shirt, pulling it with him as he stood. Then he left her wanting lips and covered her left breast with his hot mouth, sucking on her nipple through the lace of her bra. She moaned and raised her arms up for him to ease off her shirt. Her breasts lifted higher, an offering he took.

He kissed his way over to her right breast, slipping his tongue inside her demi-cup and lashing her pebbled nipple until she moaned and arched her back for more. When he pulled her shirt over her head, he didn't take it all the way off, but wrapped the soft cotton around her wrists and stretched her arms higher over her head. Her heart pounded impossibly harder, for the position left her more exposed to his questing mouth, more sensitive to his sensual fire, vulnerabilities he exploited with fervor. He popped open the front clasp of her bra with deft fingers and feasted until she gasped and moaned and writhed. Even then he didn't stop but kept pushing her. She begged, but he was relentless as he drove her to an exhilarating edge with his tongue and teeth and lips.

She was dizzy and on fire by the time he released her arms and brought his mouth back to hers for another kiss. This time he delved deeper before dancing with her tongue in a give and take that led the way but didn't dominate, fueling her desire to have more of him, feel more of him, take more of him.

She shrugged off her bra and slid her hands everywhere she could reach. His shoulders, his back, his chest. His muscled body quivered to her touch. She filled her hands with his butt and pressed him tight to her sex, feeling the bulging fullness of his arousal. He groaned and thrust against her. She eased her fingers into the waistband of his jeans and boxers to brush over the hard, velvety tip of his erection and the dewy moisture beading there. He jerked in response as if an electric shock had ripped through him. She slid all the way inside and wrapped her hand around his shaft. He brought his mouth to hers and plunged his tongue into her in tandem to each thrust of his erection into her fist. He moaned deep, a guttural sound that said he too was over the edge and wanted more, demanded more.

Breathing as heavily as she, he stepped back, forcing her to release him. "We don't want this to be over just yet." He brought his mouth to her neck where he feathered kisses over her shoulders, her breasts and her stomach, randomly brushing his tongue lightly to taste her, or nipping her skin before soothingly sucking until he reached the snap of her jeans.

She clutched his shoulders. Her knees went weak at the thought of him loving her everywhere and she leaned heavily against the sink. It had been so long since she'd been touched or allowed herself to touch that she was both eager and hesitant.

Jack was avid. He yanked on her zipper then pulled down her jeans and panties in one swift motion, barely helping her slip off her loafers and step from her clothes before he sank to his knees and looked up at her.

She bit her lip. She stood naked before him, aware of every imperfection from C-section scar to pregnancy stretch marks, imperfections that he didn't seem to see.

"Damn, you're crazy beautiful," he whispered.

She didn't get the chance to tell him he was delusional because he slid his fingers to her sex, parted the folds and then, looking up at her, licked the exposed groove. Pleasure slammed into her. She cried out and shuddered as his tongue flicked back and forth. Then he stopped. She blinked at him, dazed and quivering. He stood up and she thought she would literally faint from her need.

"Come on. I can make it the ten feet to do this right. Just barely though." He led her to the first bed, pulled down the covers and urged her back. She tugged on the waistband of his jeans and watched as he stripped then went to his duffle bag and pulled out a box of condoms. He frowned at the box. "I hope these things don't have an expiration date. It's been a while."

"Join the club," she murmured, her heart squeezing. Then she laughed at her own desperation because she wanted to yell at him to hurry. "I have an expiration date," she said. "I am going to spontaneously combust if you don't come finish what you started."

He arched a brow as he moved toward her and she melted even more. "Interesting. Just how long do I have before this said event?" He tossed an open condom on the bed, then the box of them as he looked down at her.

"Not long."

"Long enough to do this?" He knelt at the bottom of the bed and lifted her foot to gently scrape his nail along her instep.

"Oh my God," Lauren gasped as her hips lifted involuntarily to the wild shock that hit the very center of her sex. She had no idea the places were connected.

He gave her a knowing smile and followed the scrape with his tongue, riding her leg all the way up to the back of her knee before he released her. He did the same to her other leg then grasped her knees and spread her legs as wide as he could.

"Do I have long enough to do this?" He snatched a thick pillow, folded it in half and urged her hips up. He slid the pillow beneath her, leaving the very heart of her splayed open to him. He nipped and licked the insides of her thighs until she thought she'd go crazy.

“No,” she gasped, trying to urge his mouth to move the two inches to where her every cell burned for release. “You don’t have time for that.”

“How about time for this?” He breathed hot air over her exposed sex and slid a finger inside her, circling her opening with teasing strokes.

“Maybe,” she gasped, her hips undulating to the rhythm he set. As good as it all felt, it wasn’t the totally mind-blowing pleasure he’d sent slamming into her brain before. “Maybe not. Jack, I, oh, I so need—”

He lowered his head and thoroughly kissed the hardened center of her desire and she shuddered in a mini-release that he took control of and revved higher. He sucked and stroked and nipped and licked, fueling her need into a full throttle that sent her on a rocket path toward a scorching orgasm. She convulsed and saw stars waver before her visionless eyes and thought she’d attained the peak of heaven until he slid up and thrust himself inside her, filling her past the point of completion. Yet she wanted more of him. He caressed the taut peaks of her breasts and kissed her as he began pumping hard and fast into her.

She spiraled higher and wrapped her legs around his hips. She met his frenzied thrusts in an explosion of male to female. His need, his desperation, his shuddering shout of fulfillment catapulted her into an uncharted sea of pleasure.

Unable to move, unable to breathe, unable to see, Lauren was sure she had either passed out or had died and went to heaven. Jack’s full weight was on her and it was wonderful.

“Damn,” Jack whispered, breathless. He tried to lift up from the lush heaven of Lauren’s softness, but his arms shook too badly and he dropped back down. He laughed. “I think *I* expired. Spontaneously combusted.”

Lauren had yet to move. Suddenly worried, he gave up on his muscles and rolled to his side, bringing her with him. She was alive at least. Her baby blues were staring at him. She looked dazed and deliciously sated and he unbelievably had the strong urge to do her over and over again. He was still inside her, condom secure on his semi-aroused dick, allowing him to enjoy the taut glove of her sex a few minutes longer. He couldn’t follow through with his urge to have her again at the moment, but the strength of it still coiled inside him.

She suddenly sucked in air as if she hadn’t breathed in forever and then laughed too. “Ditto.” She sighed as if totally replete.

He brushed a curl from her cheek and kissed her, wondering what in the hell he was doing and wondering what in the hell he should do next. As much as his guilt urged him to be honest with her, telling her the truth about Bill right now didn’t seem right. It would taint what he sensed was a once-in-a-lifetime-like experience for both of them. He couldn’t do it.

Nor could he think about all of the crap they’d been through since he’d knocked on her door yesterday afternoon. A lifetime of training failed him. Rather than eating up the road and the satellite lines trying to

dig deeper into the web of death spreading out from Collins's deceit, the only thing Jack was capable of at the moment was wrapping his arms around Lauren, the wife of the man he'd killed, and breathing a soul-felt sigh of relief despite that dark cloud.

When they'd reached the motel just a little while ago, he'd been completely done in. It wasn't because of the bullet graze; he'd fought under worse circumstances for longer periods of time. It was because he'd failed her and because of what could have happened to her. That it was also because of what he felt for her, what he shouldn't feel for her, he ignored. He didn't want to acknowledge it because it couldn't be real and he knew without a doubt that anything beyond the here and now with her was an impossible dream.

He turned his mind back to what he needed to be thinking about. Somehow he should have put two and two together at Gardner's place and come up with a ten. That he hadn't and she'd almost paid the price for it had wiped him out and left him shaken to the very core of his being. She didn't know it, but they'd reached the end of the line for her active involvement in solving this mystery surrounding Collins. Another thing he wasn't going to tell her about now.

So what could he say? She'd sent him off his sexual charts. He'd thought he'd reached his sexual peak in his early twenties, had hot memories of hot sex, but nothing could hold a candle to the orgasm he just had. He couldn't say anything because it wasn't something meant to last. It was a dream that he could only hold for a moment.

His stomach rumbled, protesting its starved state.

"Sounds as if you're still hungry." She smiled.

"I am. In more ways than one." He slid his hand to her breast and rubbed his thumb over her coral nipple, his mouth watering again for the feel and taste of her.

Her gaze widened. "Seriously?" She sounded intrigued, which turned him on even more.

"You bet." His semi arousal inched closer to attention. "Even Kryptonited. Superman has a reputation to uphold."

The room phone rang. She froze and he tensed. The outside world and all that they'd been through spewed into the room like tear gas grenade.

"Any reason for the clerk to call?" Gory from the bullet graze, he'd sat in the car while she'd checked them in.

"Not that I know of."

Flipping their position, he slid away from and regrettably out of Lauren to answer the phone. Having his hot moment turned cold and being forced to clutch a wet condom in his fist, left him sorely irritated. Not to mention the fact that it ripped away his sense of anonymity. Had they been discovered? "What is it?"

"Uhhum. This is the front desk."

"And?"

“Your wife forgot to sign the registration paper.”

“Later,” Jack said. “We’re busy right now if you understand what I mean.” He hung up the phone amid Lauren’s shocked cry. She’d snatched the sheet up to cover herself and sat, glaring at him. He forced a grin. Had it been anyone else on the phone, a wrong number, or even no one, Jack would have had Lauren out of there in heartbeat. Needing a guest to sign in sounded legit, so they’d stay the night.

“You all but told him that we were having sex.” The blush on her cheeks was refreshing.

He leaned over and cupped her chin with his free hand. “Making love.” He kissed her. “Having sex doesn’t quite cover it in my book.” Letting her go, he headed to the bathroom, wondering what in the hell possessed him to say that to her. It was a truth that didn’t need to be told. He directed the conversation back to the clerk. “The man could have waited for you to check out to sign the paper. You paid cash, so it’s not like he needed the signature to process a payment. Besides it’s not like he doesn’t already imagine every couple is getting it on while he sits lonely at the desk. In fact, he probably looks for any excuse to call just so he can interrupt. I just made him squirm for his jolly.”

Lauren’s voice followed him. “That’s so paranoid and jaded and...and probably true. You’re so bad.”

He laughed and canned the condom. A glance in the mirror made him realize it was a total miracle that Lauren had even kissed him. He looked like a zombie from Elm Street waiting on Freddy. He popped his head back out to look at her, just to make sure he hadn’t just dreamed it all. She’d scooted to the edge of the bed, her golden hair a wild sexy mess, her lips kiss-swollen, and her delectable body barely covered with a sheet.

“I’ll beg for forgiveness later. That’s a promise. Meanwhile, interested in a shower?”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Yes, I am. Bring a condom with you.” She did and he upheld Superman’s reputation just fine.

The bitch! She’d shot him. Conrad couldn’t believe it. She’d shot him in cold blood. Sent a bullet plowing through his shoulder and left him bleeding in his driveway. He’d stuffed paper towels in the wound, applied pressure, and had done everything he could think of to stop the bleeding, but it kept bleeding like a stuck pig. The bullet had gone straight through the fleshy part of his shoulder but it still hurt like a son of a bitch. He walked through the woods, groaning with pain at every jarring step. He’d parked his car down the road, rightly thinking that Lauren’s muscle would be less vigilant if it appeared no one was home.

He still couldn’t believe she’d escaped him. It was a good thing he knew exactly where her conscience would lead her next. To Ray in Savannah, which was a little over a four hour drive from Fair Play. He hoped her muscle man was either dead or a vegetable. By the time she dealt with that, Conrad

would be ready for her at Ray's house on the river. And if by chance she didn't show, he'd have Bill's letter and would get Lauren's sweet ass afterwards. She'd pay long and hard for his pain and trouble.

Dios. The tentative knock on the door to the Magic Carpet Room had Andreas gritting his teeth. Fidel's assistant was the new Fidel and already had Andreas wishing he'd made George wait until they'd landed before eliminating the old Fidel. George didn't even arouse from his sleepy-eyed position on the couch. Andreas hoped his son was just enjoying himself too much to bother with intimidating the new servant and not depressed or feeling guilty over Fidel's death.

"¡*Adelante!*" he ordered. The new Fidel opened the door and reeled on the threshold. The idiot was afraid of heights, which may be why Andreas chose to set up office in the Magic Carpet Room. The floor and walls surrounding him provided a panoramic view of the world they were flying over. Cameras positioned at strategic angles sent live feed, giving him a true magic carpet ride through the clouds.

George loved it, found the sensation of floating through the air calming. It was amazing the things he had in common with his son.

"¿*Ahora que?*"

"Good news and bad news. Three of Bill Collins's colleagues that he sent letters to are dead and no letters were found with them. I am still waiting to hear from the operatives sent out to eliminate the other two. The good news is the operative sent after Conrad Gardner has located Bill Collins's wife and the military guy helping her. He followed them as they left Gardner's residence. They're in a populated motel in Lavonia, Georgia. He's going to wait until later tonight before taking them. Also, Collins sent a number of erotic emails to a woman in Brazil. I took the liberty of having her escorted to *El Santuario* for you to question. You may even find her very appealing."

"*Excelente.*" Andreas stood and paced over the clouds swirling on the screen at his feet. "Collins's children?"

"Are not with their mother."

"*Bien.* Keep monitoring all communications. Tell the operative to act quickly. The woman has already escaped him once, twice would prove to be adverse to his health and mine, something I guarantee he doesn't want to have happen. Let me know the minute Collins's wife is captured and alert the pilot that we will be diverting to the closest airport to her so she may accompany us for the rest of the flight to Peru."

Fidel left and Andreas joined his son to watch the clouds.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lavonia, Georgia

2030 hours

The pizza was cold but tasted great. Jack chowed down on a slice as he surfed the net, searching for any thread of information that would connect Collins's friends to a terrorist group, or any other common element that could give him a handle on what was going on. Thomas fell to his death from his deck. Edward was clubbed to death in a supposed robbery. Gardner was supposedly blown up on his boat. All dead ends, literally. And Jack had almost joined the club.

Who had been at Gardner's?

Now, according to the phone calls he'd made to Brazil, Collins's girlfriend was missing. The events chilled Jack to the bone. What had Collins done? Who was behind it all?

And what was up with his body? It disappeared from Lebanon to show up two weeks later in Brazil and now had disappeared again?

He glanced over at Lauren, his heart and gut twisting with guilt, worry and something more, none of which he wanted to face at the moment.

The local evening news blasted from the TV and Lauren had her gaze glued to the tube, hoping to catch a report about Gardner at Lake Hartwell. She was hurting to be with her sons. The call they'd made to Rico a short time ago found the crew already on the way to Disney World. Her goodnight routine with Matt and Mitch reminded him of when Livy was little and unsettled him, disrupting the status quo of his personal life even more.

The deaths of Bill's friends had her upset as well. She kept saying she should have done more.

Jack wasn't so sure. After finding out Bill's girlfriend was missing, he and Lauren had called the local police in Tampa and Savannah where Bob Cantrell and Ray Branson lived. All the police could do was check the residences for signs of trouble, then wait until there was evidence of a crime before they could act. The world was a society of addressing disasters and problems after the fact rather than preventing them from happening in the first place.

Jack wished he could do more to distract Lauren. A humorless grunt escaped him. More?

Any more and he would likely have to go to the hospital after all. He'd carried through with his promise to back her to a wall and make her forget anything to do with Collins. It'd been the shower wall. She'd been gloriously wet inside and out and he'd nearly passed out by the time he'd thrust them both to

heaven. Yet, looking at her now, wearing one of his T-shirts, knowing she was naked under it... Damn, but he could already feel another hard-on coming. And the nap they'd taken had restored his—

"Jack!" Lauren leapt from the bed, rushing toward the other side of the room, where the windows were covered with thick curtains. He had his feet propped up on the dinette table and the chair angled back on two legs with his computer across his lap. Driven by the alarm in her voice, he slammed upright and had to catch the computer in midair as he reached for his P226.

"What?" He sucked in air, searching for a threat and found nothing.

"The letter," she said. "Bill's letter." She reached into his backpack and pulled it out of the compartment they'd placed it in this morning."

Setting aside his pistol and the computer, he joined her. "You scared the crap out of me. Have you remembered something?"

"No. But I just saw a commercial for Coliseum National Bank and Trust based in Rome, Georgia. The letter said NB&T, right?" She opened the letter.

He looked over her shoulder, a tinge of excitement kicking his pulse up a notch.

...our visit to the Coliseum in Rome and the kiss we shared despite our "suspicious minds" this "July". NBT if you can believe it. The trip was just like our love me tender honeymoon in "blue Hawaii".

"I think you're on to something."

"We can go there first thing in the morning and see if Bill had an account or even a safety deposit box there."

"Why wait? He's given you clues. Why not log onto the bank's website and see what we can do." He grabbed a pen and paper and she carried the letter over to the computer.

"Now that I'm looking at this as a bank, there aren't any numbers in the sentence to indicate an account." She frowned with doubt.

Jack groaned. "I can't believe he'd make it this easy, but there are quotation marks around three sections of the sentences."

"Easy? If I hadn't seen the commercial, I wouldn't have put it together. You didn't at first pass either. I don't know how he expected I would have figured it out."

"Maybe he left clues in other places that you haven't found yet. Let's log in and see. Passwords usually require you add a number into them. So use suspiciousminds7 for that. Blue Hawaii for the sign in."

Lauren entered the information and amazingly moved to the next step where it asked her to answer several security questions. Bill's mother's maiden name. City where he was born. And the make of his first car. Lauren knew the answers, was likely one of only a handful of people who did, if not the only person. She logged in and nearly fainted from shock. It was a joint account in both her name and Bill's name. Two million dollars was in it.

"Dear God."

Jack whistled. "Nice share."

"What was he into?"

"First, change the email address attached to the account to yours. Second, change the password to something only you would know and I mean only you and don't tell a soul. Not even me. Then we'll search through the account's activity and see if we can find where the money came from."

"Okay, but the last activity on the account was two weeks ago."

Jack set his hands on either side of her face and made her look directly into his eyes. "Somebody is killing people. That money could be the reason. I'll be damned if you're going to be next. But we also need to do everything we can to stop whoever it is from getting what they want. Bill sent you clues in a letter. He might have sent them to the others too. Damn! If this money is what the whole thing is about and three of Bill's five friends are dead, that means either Bob or Ray or both of them together could be behind the murders."

"That would explain a lot and why they're a step ahead of us."

He turned away, his gut churning. Bob or Ray might explain what was happening among Bill's friends, and they might have enough contacts to pull off a kidnapping in Brazil, but it didn't explain the international aspects to the case. The collateral damage Collins left behind kept escalating without a clue as to why he'd been in Lebanon. More importantly, how was Jack going to protect Lauren and get to the bottom of the cesspool at the same time?

Within a few minutes Lauren finished changing the password on the account and Jack pulled up the current activity. "There are regular deposits from BioLogics, which we know about, and Novordem. Ever heard of them?"

"No."

Jack clicked to view the details for one of the Novordem transactions. "They are located in Sao Paulo, Brazil." Skimming through statements from previous months Jack found that Bill had also made payments from the account over the past year. Over twenty million worth. He jotted down the companies paid, asking Lauren if she was familiar with any of them as he did. "BlueTech, Green Consolidated Industries, IASC, Emir Development, and MCarridas Incorporated. His girlfriend?"

"Sounds like." Lauren shook her head, her disgust evident. "How much was he paying for it?"

"Ten thousand a month."

"He got a bargain deal. The million dollar neighborhood near us had two women living in a mansion who were busted for prostitution. Their price was ten thousand a night. Is that insane or what?"

"Were I a rich man you'd be—"

"Don't even go there."

"Priceless."

She rolled her eyes then went to work on reviewing Bill's letter and he went to work on the computer. The wrenching frustration of the past twenty-four hours channeled itself into excitement the more he investigated. BlueTech was an International Tactical Supply Company. Anything to do with combat gear or accessories excluding the weapons themselves could be bought. IASC turned out to be International Arab Shipping Company, based out of India and just might be Collins's Middle Eastern connection. Green Consolidated Industries was a black hole. Great website, great spiel on environmental issues. Zero information on who was behind it or what the company did exactly. Novordem purported itself as a humanitarian organization dedicated to the liberation of those dominated by tyranny and very anti-America, his best lead yet because a reporter from Brazil who'd written an article supposedly tying Novordem to drug cartel money and a faction of Hezbollah in South America had been executed last month. He needed access to more information than what he could get on his own. He called Weston.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Roger's cell phone vibrated and he jerked awake. His initial heart-hammering burst of alarm eased the moment he realized Mari was safe on the couch, asleep with her bandaged hand in his as he sat on the floor next to her. He must have drifted off after she had because he'd just been dreaming that the sniper bullet had ripped through her stomach and she was dying in his arms. That he couldn't stop the blood. That he couldn't save her or her baby.

He drew a deep breath and tried to let go of his choking fear as he answered the phone. Keeping his voice low, he stood and moved to another room in the Fort Bragg apartment he'd borrowed from an out of town buddy and shut the door. "DT. I'm still waiting to hear back about BioLogics. The license plate numbers were from stolen tags. What's up now?"

"I've got three dead men, a missing actress, two million dollars, a list of companies, one attached to drug and Hezbollah rumors and two possible suspects. My only tie-in to it all is Collins."

Roger whistled. "Been busy."

"And then some. How is Mari?"

"Not good." Roger clenched his fist. "We know who the bastard is now. Frank Dugar. Member of the Viper Militia from Washington state with a history of mental illness. He, uh, tried to take her out with a sniper rifle when we left the hospital today. I've got her with me on post."

"Have the cops caught the SOB yet?"

"No."

DT's responding curse didn't even come close to expressing Roger's anger, frustration and self hatred.

"Give me the info and I'll see what's taking Dean so long. He should have been back to me by now. I dropped the ball." Roger sighed.

“With good reason, Commander. Listen, I need to find out what Lauren’s security options are. In case this situation mushrooms out of control.”

“Like how, DT?” Roger did not like DT’s tone or the hesitation in his voice. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing that I haven’t been able to handle, but I need to know there’s something out there for her and her kids besides me.”

“That’s one thing you don’t have to worry about. I’ll—”

“No disrespect, sir, because I know you’d do anything for your men, but you wouldn’t be able to walk out the door this instant and be here if needed. I already have Rico with her kids, but with our military hands tied, if this gets any bigger than it is, or something happens to me, I need assurance that she’ll be taken care of. Protected.”

Roger focused his gaze on Mari, thinking that his and DT’s current paths were oddly running parallel. “I’ll see what I can line up.”

“Thanks.” DT hung up. Before Roger could call Dean Ramirez at the agency, Beck called. Damn but it was going to be a long night.

“She’s crippled,” Beck said in response to Roger’s greeting.

“What?” Roger frowned, wondering if Beck was on another bender.

“Amanda James. The ambassador’s daughter we tried to rescue in Lebanon. She’s paralyzed from the waist down. They don’t know if she’ll ever walk again. Doesn’t it bother you, Commander? Doesn’t it bother you that both of us had a hand in that?”

Roger sucked in air, sucker punched by Beck, and Jesus, the thick sound of tears in his voice. His man, his responsibility was on the same crumbling edge he was, and being commander might just drag them both over the ledge.

“Every second of every day,” Roger whispered. “I don’t shut my eyes without thinking about how things went down and what I could have done differently. I can’t sleep. I can’t breathe without hearing the cries, seeing the blood, feeling the oppressive vise of having to bury a gut burning secret amid that pain and guilt.”

“Then why—?”

“Then I weigh what happened in Lebanon and why against the thousands of Americans who died at Muhammad al Qassem’s hands and the thousands more who could die were he to succeed again. After I do that, I suck it up, knowing only more death would have followed Lebanon if I hadn’t taken him out. And only more death will follow if the wrong spin is given to what happened. Something I have no doubt the media would twist all to hell. Does it make every second any easier? No.”

A long, heavy silence followed. Roger felt as if his guts were slashed open.

Beck hung up.

Roger sat in the dark a minute, trying to breathe, trying to regain a semblance of the strength that had guided him all his life. A strength that failed him now. Then he set to work. He called Dean Ramirez at the agency again.

“Just about to call you,” Dean said.

“I expected to hear from you sooner,” Roger replied.

“Yeah. I thought so too. But something is shaking here. From the time you called last night until I planned to call you back this morning, BioLogics and several other companies went from obscure dots in a sea of nothing to red hot tamales in a storm of intrigue. A Staff Operation Officer (SOO) called for the alert after hearing from his deep cover agent. Now NCS (National Clandestine Service) is in on it. I’ve been trying to find out why before getting back to you. Why is Delta involved with BioLogics?”

“One of my men is caught up in a situation that may or may not have some serious repercussions.” Roger read off the list of new companies DT had given him. “Any of those on the list?”

“I’ll get back to you shortly. I may need more info on the situation as well. I have a call in to the SOO handling this. He’s a real SOB stickler who everyone calls ‘director’. I doubt he’ll tell me anything, but it’s worth a try.”

“Thanks, Dean. I owe you one.”

“You owe me three, Rog. Don’t worry, I aim to collect. Next time you’re in D.C. buzz me and we’ll hit the town. It’s been months since I’ve enjoyed my bachelor status.”

Roger set his gaze on Mari. He wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon. “We’ll see. You might have to find another partner in crime.”

“What? Jesus, Roger. You can’t be serious. Who is she?”

“No. You’ve got the wrong idea. She—” Mari sat up abruptly, crying out. “Gotta go. Later.” Roger disconnected. He meant to leave his cousin Paul a message or at least speak to his chief of staff about the can of worms DT had crawled into and what it might mean to the public spin on the Lebanon disaster, but set that task aside for now. He wasn’t sure the call needed to be made yet, and Mari’s need was evident.

Lavonia, Georgia

The moment Jack disconnected from Weston, Lauren waved Bill’s letter at him.

“Bill would have never used the expression Yahoo or Viva Las Vegas. They were beneath him. What if it’s a clue for an email address?”

“Good thinking.” Jack pulled the computer toward him. “Any of that in quotations?”

“Grand Jackpot and Viva Las Vegas.” Using the opposite order as they had with the bank information. Jack signed onto Yahoo! and pulled up an email account. “You nailed it, Lauren.”

The cell rang, displaying an unfamiliar number.

Jack answered.

"Who is this?" the woman demanded.

"Who are you calling?" Jack countered. Lauren looked up from Bill's letter.

"Lauren Collin's left this number. I'm Sarah Cantrell."

"Sarah Cantrell. Hold on." Jack handed the phone to Lauren. What needed to be said would best come from someone the woman knew. If Sarah was calling, it didn't eliminate Bob off the culprit list, but it did lower the odds.

Lauren clutched the phone. "Sarah? It's Lauren."

"Hey. I've been meaning to call. See how you're doing. What's this about danger? We're fine."

"Where's Bob?"

Jack leaned in close to hear the call too. Lauren adjusted the receiver his way.

"Robert went to his office straight from the airport. We've been in Pebble Beach."

"Sarah. Listen. This is going to be unbelievable but, Bill's dead and somebody is killing his friends. Thomas. Edward. Conrad. They're all dead."

"What? We were just with Edward yesterday morning. I have phone messages from Thomas from then too, wanting Robert to call about a letter from Bill. Asked if Robert got one too."

"Does Bob have one?"

"I don't know. We haven't checked the mail yet."

"Then don't. I think you need to get out of there now. Get to a neighbor's house. Someplace safe, and call me back. I really need to talk to Bob. This is very serious."

"Lauren, I've got great security. And there is a letter here from Bill. Let me open it."

"Sarah. Get someplace safe first."

Glass shattered. "Jesus. I think someone just broke into the house."

"Get out, Sarah. Get out of the house!" Lauren cried. Jack wrapped his arm around her shaking shoulders.

Sarah screamed, a chilling cry of terror. It gripped the gut and jerked hard. The line went dead, leaving him and Lauren dying inside to do something.

"Jack!" Horror was etched deep on her soul.

She looked at him, and he wished to God he really was Superman. "I heard. I'm calling the local police. What is the address?" He went across the room to his computer and the throw-away cell phone they'd bought earlier.

"I don't know! They live in Tampa. Bayshore something. Robert and Sarah Cantrell."

Jack started Googling the Cantrells and called the local police. He found their address via the phone number, but had to repeat the emergency three different times to three different people before someone

finally got it and took action by dispatching the emergency call. “The police are on their way. What kind of office does Bob have?”

“I’m not sure. God.” Lauren scrubbed her palms against her pale face.

“Take several deep breaths and try. If you hadn’t been on the phone with her then she wouldn’t be getting help now. You have to believe they’re going to reach her in time, okay?”

She nodded. “I think Bob has several law offices that he’s the head of.”

Jack Googled and found three offices in the Tampa area bearing the name Robert Cantrell and Associates. It was after hours. A recording directed him to use the email directory on the company website for messages and after-hours assistance. Jack sent Cantrell an emergency message.

Your wife is being attacked. Bill, Thomas, Edward and Conrad are dead. You are in danger. Call Lauren Collins. He included the cell phone number and hit send. “All we can do now is wait.”

“I know, but knowing that doesn’t make sitting here any easier. I should have done something more.”

Jack exhaled hard. He felt the same way. “What? Until twenty minutes ago, the Cantrells were out of town. We suspected Bill’s friends were being targeted after finding out about Thomas and Edward this morning, but weren’t positive until Gardner. We called and warned them twice, we called for the police to check on them. So unless you knew of another way to reach them or we were able to instantly transport ourselves there after being attacked at Gardner’s, I’m not sure what could have been—”

He heard a scraping sound outside the windows behind him and to his left. It was dark outside and the worn curtains left a sliver of a gap in the middle, directly in line to where Lauren stood near the bathroom on the other side of the room.

Jack shot out of his seat, P226 in hand. He jumped onto one bed, leapt to the other and landed on the ground next to Lauren in a split second. He shoved her into the bathroom and managed to crouch into a firing position just as the window shattered. Bullets slammed into the drywall behind him.

“Lock the door,” he yelled to Lauren and took cover behind the TV credenza. Tear gas landed in the room, spewing, and a gas-masked man in black rolled inside, pistol in hand. He slid next to the bed. Jack’s stomach churned. He had only had seconds to deal with the man before the tear gas would incapacitate him.

Jack took aim and waited carefully for the man. He wanted answers from this guy. He could see the shooter’s dark shape reflected in the glass-covered picture hanging over the bed. Jack saw the man shift and Jack fired, aiming for the man’s gun hand. Jack aced the shot, the man’s gun went flying, and Jack barreled forward. The man did a surprise flip and kicked the gun out of Jack’s hand. *Shit.*

Jack came at the man’s midsection and thrust upward, slamming the heel of his palm beneath the man’s chin and snapping the SOB’s head back, but the man twisted, escaping the deadly force behind Jack’s blow.

The man aimed for Jack’s jugular notch to crush his windpipe, but Jack caught the man’s wrist and shifted, rotating the guy’s arm, bending it backward hard.

The man grunted and retaliated by chopping at Jack's neck, trying to stun with a forearm blow to the sensitive nerves there. Jack had to twist away and lost his grip on the man's arm.

The fight was fast and lethal, both of them trained and experienced in deadly hand to hand combat.

But Jack was losing ground. The tear gas had his eyes pouring and his lungs burning. He managed to rip off the attacker's gas mask, evening the playing field as the choking fog of tear gas thickened.

The man stepped back and drew a knife. Jack charged forward, deflecting the man's thrust, and latching on to the man's hand as he shoved the SOB backward. The table splintered and they both crashed to the floor, rolling and fighting for the upper hand.

Jack landed on his back as they hit the TV credenza. He was running out of time as the effects of the tear gas took a toll. Jack roared in frustration, reared his hips up, slamming the man's head into the hard wood of the credenza.

Then suddenly, through the growing fog, he saw Lauren. She swung something thick and white, hitting the man on the side of his head and the guy keeled over. Knockout punch delivered.

Coughing badly, Jack pushed the man off, secured the knife, and flexi-cuffed the bastard with his own cuffs. Lauren dropped what Jack now realized was a heavy ceramic toilet tank lid, and pulled at Jack to escape the tear gas.

She had a clear plastic shower cap over her face, and likely needed to breathe. The woman was resourceful with a capital R.

Practically strangling from the tear gas, he rushed Lauren outside. She pulled off the plastic and drew deep breaths of air. She'd put on her jeans that had been left in the bathroom and still wore his T-shirt. The whole encounter had lasted no more than a few minutes.

Jack popped the car open, grabbed a bottle of water and poured it over his face, gaining a small amount of relief from the tear gas. He opened the trunk and gave Lauren the keys. "Get in. Lock the doors. Back the car up to the room's door and wait. If anybody approaches drive off without me. You can pick me up on the highway just down the road."

She nodded. He took the shower cap from her, using it as he went back into the room. He wrapped the attacker in a sheet and stuffed him into the trunk of the car, grabbed a wet towel, then collected the computer as well as his and Lauren's other belongings before joining Lauren in the car and they hit the road.

Weston wasn't going to be happy. Jack just hoped the guy in the trunk didn't off himself in the five hour drive to Fort Bragg. They didn't need another dead end.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

2200 hours

Miserable and in pain, Gardner crouched naked and chilled in the palmetto shrubs outside Ray Branson's multi-million dollar digs. Located on Skidaway Island, the luxury community offered the best golfing and yachting to be had in the Savannah area. The salty ocean breeze coming across the marshes was heavy with moisture and made the night cool. Getting past security had been a challenge, but he'd waited outside the service entrance for just the right truck to hide beneath. They were having some big shindig at the club house tonight, which afforded him a little more freedom to move around, but not much.

He'd had to wait outside. Ray had cheated on Conrad and had replaced the security system Conrad had sold to him. Gardner wasn't sure how to disable it so had been forced to sit in the yard to wait for Ray's return, like a dog.

That burned.

The carbon steel of the K-bar tactical knife he clutched in his right hand was solid and powerful enough to overcome his handicap. He was generally left-handed, but the bullet wound Collins's bitch had nailed him with hurt like hell. He'd packed the wound with gauze and had downed as many over-the-counter pain meds as he dared.

He'd given a lot of thought during the drive on how to take care of Ray and had decided on a knife. The damn rifle he'd used on Lauren's muscle had left Conrad deflated. He'd waited forever for the shot and then it had been over too soon. And he wasn't even sure if he'd offed the guy or not. Clubbing Edward had been much more satisfying. He could feel the death, smell the blood, hear and see Edward's terror and pain.

Guns had their place but not for meting out justice.

The knife would do well, but would also be messier, which is why he had his clothes in a bundle under his arm. It would make clean up easier.

Across the small cove was the club house. He could see people in gowns and tuxes, milling around, drinking champagne, completely uncaring that there were folks like him who had to fight to have a dollar in their pocket. They were just like Edward and Bill and Ray and Bob. Thomas not so much, but then, his death had been an accident.

Somebody needed to go rig the gas to that place and send them all packing to their heavenly reward. Conrad shifted, thinking he'd really enjoy seeing the place blow, and who knew, it could be hours before Ray returned. But what if Ray was there? What if Ray had Bill's letter on him?

Pissed and deprived, Conrad settled back into his spot to watch and to burn inside. He'd always been on the outside of anything good in life, looking in as if he were a lowlife unworthy of anything more. Except for one brief time. Then he'd been everyone's hero. The magic of the game, the feel of the ball, the cheer of the crowd, the whole shinning glory that had gilded him football's golden boy. It had all been his.

He tightened his grip on the knife and tensed as an expensive sports car pulled into Ray's drive and the streetlight illuminated Ray in the driver's seat. A woman in red sat in the passenger's seat. Conrad smiled; she came dressed for his party. As the garage door opened, and Ray slid the Jag-U-R inside—Conrad hated those commercials—he rolled inside, clothes tucked and knife ready. He waited until Ray disarmed the security system before he attacked the couple on the steps leading into the house.

From the first slash until the last, Conrad felt the satisfying rush of blood both in his veins and from out of the veins of his victims washed over him. The surrounding scents were earthy and dark. The wild energy and terror that had permeated the air was electrifying. The euphoria better than any orgasm he'd had in a long time. The mud room was just inside and Conrad showered, hating to wash away the blood, but realizing now more than ever he couldn't be caught. He had the perfect set up as long as everyone believed he too had been a victim. But were he to leave any evidence then he'd lose his anonymity.

Once he was clean, dry and redressed, he covered the shower, knife and towel he used with bleach, then he went in search for the letter Bill sent to Ray. He found it unopened inside a bin filled with mail and packages. Conrad quickly opened the letter and scanned it for the next clue to piece together with the others.

There once was a king. He died on a throne. In his land of Grace, did the whole world mourn. Buried like a bone, by the water's spray. He reigns supreme until this day.

The jackpot lies as does he, but the real prize will be—

Cold steel pressed into the back of his neck. "Don't move. Drop the letter and put your hands behind your back or I will blow your head off."

¡Mierda! Andreas stormed into his operations room on the Airbus A380. They were less than two hours from home. He couldn't believe Fidel's emergency call and had to see the live feed immediately. George barked his irritation at the interruption of their picnic among the clouds. He'd had his top chef deliver a number of delicacies that both he and his son enjoyed and they'd just settled down on a checkered table cloth on the floor of the Magic Carpet room for the feast when Fidel called.

The British office building that housed both GreenWorld Corporation and BioLogics's European headquarters was being raided. Guru had video of the invasion streaming in via a backup security system. The ten of his employees gathered about the screen scattered, looking at George with fear.

Andreas ignored them and set his gaze on the unfolding scene. Men in black, dressed in special ops tactical gear and carrying MP5s swarmed every floor of the building, confiscating everything from computers to files to phones. Andreas was stunned. Why hadn't any of his moles in any of the world's top intelligence agencies informed him of the danger?

Guru switched from camera to camera, showing that every business in the building was being targeted to a search, but only BioLogics and GreenWorld Corporation's equipment was being taken. No audio could be heard along with the feed. The men were either working in complete silence or had a high tech inter-communication system.

"*Madre de Dios.*" His security resources weren't prepared to stop an attack like this. Not in such a civilized area of the world. In Brazil, yes, in Peru at his *Santuario*, yes, but in London where political correctness ruled over everyone and the rights of even an earthworm were protected? No. There'd never been the need. His staunchest environmental supporters were parliament VIPs. He pulled George into his arms to hold him close as he stared at the screen at a loss for the first time since he'd been abandoned as a child.

Fidel tapped the computer screen. "Guru, can we capture some of these men's faces and search for an ID?"

Brilliant, Andreas thought. Exactly what he would have suggested once the shock had eased. Guru set to work. The men's faces were blackened with ski caps pulled low and Night Vision Goggles (NVGs) covering their eyes. Was it even possible?

Guru had the same thought. "With the equipment on, I don't think...hold on. I'm going to hack into the management's computer system and trigger the auxiliary office lights."

Minutes later, in the middle of their raid, the entire building lit up like a Christmas tree. Blinded, men stumbled and yelled before snatching off their NVGs. It had put a major disturbing knot in the smooth operation.

"Bloody hell. What's going on, Scottie?" one man shouted, drawing Andreas's attention.

"Enlarge his face, Guru."

Guru filled the screen with a close up of the man's face and Andreas leaned in close, swearing the man's eyes were very familiar to him.

"Give me more, Guru. I know this man."

On another screen, Guru brought the man's profile up as he turned and spoke to another man. The accent was off, the beard was gone, the hair shaved short, but the nose and the eyes and the voice were the same. Saleem Al-Jabar! The investor he'd had dinner in Dubai with last evening. The investor who knew Andreas was on his way back to South America.

Andreas had known something was going on. The sheikh, UAE's president Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, was apparently trying to steal GXP from him! Andreas had a surprise for him.

“Fidel. Divert all my Black Op teams from the Canadian attack and jet them to Dubai. Econ 1 is docked there. Tell them there’s been a change in our next oil targets. I want to hit all the major oil facilities in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. Leave no reserve untouched. They’re to begin the attack as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir. I also have more bad news and some minor news to report.”

“You speak English well, Fidel.”

“I was educated in America. An asset to you of course.”

Andreas raised a doubtful brow. “¿*Como es que?*”

“Because, unlike the other Fidel, I have more knowledge of how the world works and am not afraid to make some small decisions on my own. We have been unable to reach the operative after Collins’s wife. I have sent a man to the hotel they were at. Also, a small call was made to one of the watch numbers. The message was, “Leaving town now. We are safe. Will call soon. Love you.” It was made from a hotel north of Atlanta. I heard some background noise and had Guru amplify it. Play it for us, Guru.”

Though garbled the words were still discernable. “See Mickey Mouse! Hurry, Aunt Angie!”

Fidel smiled and Andreas tingled with excitement. “Disney World. Bill Collins’s sons are likely going to Disney World. I’ve checked all the events in Georgia, and in the surrounding states. There is nothing with Mickey Mouse on the ticket.”

George tightened his hold on Andreas’s neck and pressed his lips into a flat line, expressing his dislike of this Fidel. Andreas patted George’s back and smiled back at Fidel, liking the replacement after all. “This call was made at what time?”

“Four o’clock today.”

“Divert our flight to Orlando. By morning I want every man possible looking for Collins’s twin sons wherever Mickey Mouse can be seen. There will be only so many blond, identical-looking little boys at the amusement park. The odds are more than in our favor. *Excelente*, Fidel.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

0330 hours, August 7th

Unable to sleep, Roger was already awake when DT called.

“You’re what?”

“I’m here. About five miles out and I have an assassin cuffed in the trunk. Hopefully he’s still alive.”

“You don’t make life easy.”

“I could divert and pound his ass six feet under before returning. He’s gassed me twice, shot me once, and has terrorized Lauren and her kids. I owe him.”

“I didn’t mean for extremes. He isn’t a target and you aren’t on a mission.”

“Which is exactly why he’s alive and in my trunk. He might even know who’s behind Lebanon.”

Roger ran a harried hand through his hair. “You can’t bring the SOB on post. Go to my house in town. You know where the key is. Let me make a few calls for a couple of babysitters to come. You and Lauren can bunk there until morning then we’ll deal.”

“Make it fast. We’ve got more information, an email account, and a partial page of a letter Collins sent to one of his friends is being faxed to your office. The man’s wife was shot and the attacker got the first part of it. She’s in critical condition.”

“And we still have no idea what this is about?”

“I’ve got two million, but I think it’s more than money and it’s global.”

“Got it.”

“See you at o-dark-thirty.”

“It’s already o-dark-thirty,” Roger replied and hung up the phone. By the time he found a couple of good guys to help out DT, the phone rang again.

It was Dean, from Langley.

“You’re up late.”

“Still at the office and not even close to quitting time. I thought I’d give you the heads up, though.”

“On what?”

“Fire and Brimstone are coming your way,” Dean quipped.

“Meaning?” Roger rubbed the aching knot of tension between his eyes.

“Not only will the SOB SOO I told you about but also some NCS peeps will be on your doorstep by 0630. My inquiries hit a hornet’s nest. They want to talk to you directly and to your man.”

“Nice notice.”

“Yeah, well. They thought it rude to wake you. I didn’t. You’ve hit on something big and the SOO isn’t sharing. He’s shut down tight on all information. You owe me for this one.”

“I keep hearing that. Thanks for the call.” Roger disconnected. He’d have to call his cousin first thing in the morning. He hated to start the President’s day out with this mess, but better that than it all blowing up in Paul’s face. Part of Weston wanted to believe DT was on the right trail to explain Lebanon. Part of him didn’t want anyone to look at what happened twice. With the CIA and NCS jumping into the situation, it could cause big problems.

Every time Lauren’s eyes drooped shut and sleep lay but a whisper away, she found herself jerking awake, sure that proverbial bullet headed her way would hit home. She supposed her paranoia was a normal, given the events of the past forty-eight hours. It also didn’t help that an assassin was bound and gagged in a room on the other side of the house.

Sure, two capable men toting guns were in the house as well as Jack. One guard was inside the room with the tied up gunman—she had a problem referring to him as a prisoner, because he wasn’t a victim or a hostage but a disabled murderer. The other guard sat just outside that door. Jack was on the couch in the living room between her and the assassin. Jack had distanced himself since the attack at the hotel and it bothered her. It wasn’t that she’d expected wine and roses, but the easy warmth they’d shared after making love had been good. Really good. Now it was gone.

She wasn’t even sure why he’d shut down. He had blamed himself several times for being caught off guard. Had said he should be shot for letting it happen. She’d looked at him and told him to cut himself some slack. He had been shot for starters.

Also, she’d been the one in the driver’s seat coming to the hotel and aside from the black sedan she saw shortly after leaving Gardner’s, a sedan which had turned off the main road, she hadn’t seen that they were followed to the hotel.

But Jack hadn’t cut himself any slack and she lay in the dark too afraid to sleep too afraid to get up—

Her door cracked open, followed by silence, but she could feel him there.

“Jack?” she whispered, sitting up to blink at the shadows.

“Yeah.” His dark silhouette emerged into the room. “You have any extra room in that bed?”

“Too much. I can’t sleep.”

“Me either.” He set his pistol on the bedside table, emptied his pockets, then ditched his shirt and jeans. Climbing into bed, he pulled her into his strong arms. She sank against his solid warmth and sighed,

breathing in the seductive scent of fresh soap and spice. Her cheek brushed along the springy silk of his chest hair and settled over his heart where she closed her eyes and reveled in the rhythmic beat.

“Thank God you’re okay.”

Jack’s throat tightened with emotion at the wealth of care in Lauren’s voice. He was the one who was thanking God that she was all right. What he’d almost cost her still had his insides wrenched tight. He couldn’t say anything so he brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead. He didn’t deserve to be in her bed, he’d yet to be honest with her, but he couldn’t rest until he had his arms around her. Pulling her close, he breathed a sigh of relief for the first time since the bullet grazed his head outside Gardner’s.

She snuggled in closer to him and ran her soft hands over his back and shoulders, kneading as she caressed. The rough tension in him shifted into raw arousal. He buried his face into her silken hair, losing himself in her sweet lavender fragrance. Her breath quickened and his pulse kicked.

She kissed his neck, his stubble-rough jaw, and pressed herself against his erection. He wanted, needed the soft heat of her skin against his. He pulled off her shirt and filled his hands with her full breasts, caressing her nipples with his palms then sucking on their hardened peaks.

He shoved down her jeans, leaving her naked to his hands and questing tongue. She matched him kiss for kiss as he edged their passion to a feverish pace with every stroke of his touch, every thrust of his tongue. He went to kiss his way down to the sweet nub of her sex, but she pushed him back and shifted herself over him, her body a seductive silhouette in the shadows.

“My turn.” Her husky, rich voice sent a shiver right to his throbbing dick, making him swell harder and thicker. She kissed her way down his neck, to the center of his chest and around the hard disks of his nipples. She teasingly nipped and soothingly licked as her silken hair brushed over his skin, taunting him with pleasure. Moving lower, she slid her fingers into his boxers and wrapped her hand around his penis, squeezing up and down his hard length, pumping him into an edgy state of need and want.

He didn’t care about anything except getting inside her and thrusting them both to another mind shaking orgasm. But she leaned in close before he could move and circled her tongue around the tip of his erection. He sucked in air and fought a strangled groan as she flicked her tongue back and forth along the sensitive groove of his sex then sucked him deep into her mouth. His hips jerked wildly in response. She sucked again, harder, deeper, her tongue sending white hot shards of pleasure to his core.

He shuddered, feeling close to a slamming orgasm, but wanting more of her before he lost control.

“Lauren.” Shuddering with need, he urged her head up and guided her to straddle him as he shoved his boxers down and off. “Take me.” He reached to the bedside table and slid a condom into her hand. “Take me inside you. Take me deep.”

She eased the condom over his erection and positioned herself above him. He reached up and rolled her nipples as he thrust into her, lifting his hips and her knees off the bed. She groaned, and ground herself

against him. He lowered and then thrust again, leaving one of her nipples to slide his thumb into the wet groove of her sex and flick the hard nub waiting for him there. Her thighs clenched him tighter, her nails dug into his chest, and she arched as her head fell back. He thrust again and again, driven to take her higher with each heated stroke. Her hips pumped in rhythm to his demands until she shuddered.

“Jack,” she whispered as if in total heaven.

He grasped her hips and plunged himself over the wild edge she relentlessly drove him to. He seemed completely incapable of any control where she was concerned. She collapsed on top of him and he wrapped her in his arms, listening as her ragged breaths gave way to exhaustion and sleep. After a time, he eased them on their sides, set the condom out of the way, and followed her into sleep, refusing to think about anything but the waves of pleasure she left rippling through his body, mind and soul. Tomorrow’s truths would take it all away. Tonight was all he had.

Machine gunfire ripped through Jack’s sound sleep. He couldn’t wake up. He was caught in a choking web of a nightmare from the past. His body jerked as his mind sucked him back into a smoke filled room where the earth opened up and the fires of Hell raced to consume him.

“They’re here, DT. They’re alive!”

Jack looked across the smoke-filled room toward Pecos. Sweat, fear and the growing heat of the fire eating the floor beneath them were suffocating. Nausea churned in his gut and he gripped his MP5 tighter.

“See if they’re wired,” he yelled to Pecos, his instincts screaming danger at him as he scanned the room they’d just invaded. Two terrorists lay dead at his feet. It would have been just like the sick sonsofbitches to booby trap the hostages and blow the fucking world up at the moment of seeming victory.

Down the hall, the Sandman’s gunfire holding back militants from coming up the stairs kept a steady pace. Rico had taken a hit; his right arm hung useless and dripping blood. He’d slung back his machine gun, armed his left hand with his M9 Beretta and kept moving.

Behind Rico, the door of the armoire seemingly opened a fraction wider.

“Get down!” Jack yelled. Diving, he shoved Rico aside as gunfire erupted from the slit, catching Jack in the leg. He twisted in mid air and let loose his MP5 in a spray of bullets that chewed and splintered wood in every direction.

A Caucasian, blond male in full business regalia fell from the armoire and face-planted on the Persian carpet.

Jack kicked the AK-47 out of reach, flexi-cuffed the bastard then put his muzzle against the target’s head before flipping him over.

“Well, fuck me and you,” the man whispered, gasping and choking, his blue eyes full of mocking amusement. Coughing up blood, the man died with a smile.

“Take cover!” Jack yelled, rearing back, his skin crawling with dread as he expected the body at his feet to explode. The threat of a bomb was the only thing that made sense of the dying man’s words. Rico rolled away and Pecos slammed the bathroom door, shutting him inside with the women. Then nothing happened. Just the sound of the Sandman at work.

Still not trusting that the man wasn’t rigged, Jack finally moved. He motioned for Rico to join Pecos with the Prime Minister and Ambassador’s daughters while he helped the Sandman. They had to get out of there before they burned to death. From satellite images, the west bank of windows would be the best choice to exit.

He reached the threshold to the hall. He could barely see the Sandman rocking with his MP5. Flames were licking up the walls and smoke was too thick to breathe. Jack moved toward Neil then the building shook, throwing Jack off balance as concrete and glass imploded and slammed the Sandman into the wall. The blast wave hit Jack and knocked him to the ground. He struggled to his knees, going for Neil, who lay unmoving on the floor when another explosion, this one from below, blew everything apart. The surrounding walls, wood and concrete became a wild sea of death that buried Jack alive in wave after wave of debris.

Jack woke, his body covered in sweat, his heart pounding hard, his chest frozen with pain. The urgency to save Neil still gripped his every muscle. He had to fight against the panic rising in his throat, fight to hold on to Lauren and realize the nightmare wasn’t happening at that moment even as his mind chased after the details.

Is that how things went down?

Chapter Thirty

0630 hours

Matt? Mitch? Lauren awoke with a start from her dream. She'd been standing in a thick mist, calling to her sons, who were just out of sight. She could hear their laughter, their excited voices as they raced their cars, but somehow couldn't reach them, nor could they hear her. She shoved the unsettling feeling aside. She'd call them shortly, sure they'd soon be up, jumping on Angie's bed, demanding to get to Disney World.

The grayish light of a waffling dawn suffused the room and Jack was already gone. But the spot in the bed next to her was still warm and the mark of his lovemaking still lingered on her lips and inside her core.

She rose as her mind turned to last night's discoveries. The sooner they exposed Bill's crimes and found the roots of his terroristic activities, the sooner she'd get her sons and her mangled wreck of a life back. She'd have to rebuild. Go somewhere. Start new.

After taking care of essentials and putting herself as together as she was going to get, she found Jack in the kitchen, gripping a cup of coffee. His face grim. His computer sat on the table before him and he wasn't alone. The man who stood to greet her had her jaw popping open.

It wasn't because his handsomeness stunned her. It wasn't that he was cut from the same ruggedly dynamic cloth as Jack was, only taller. It was because were the man to salt his temples, she would have sworn that President Paul Anderson was standing in front of her.

Before he or Jack could speak, she stuck out her hand. "You must be Commander Weston."

"Roger to you. And you're Lauren Collins."

"Just Lauren, for now. The things I'm learning make me want to change my last name." She glanced toward the computer. "Have you logged back into the email account?"

Jack nodded. After arriving at Weston's house last night, they'd glanced at the account the attacker had interrupted them from doing. Unfortunately neither she nor Jack had been able to discern anything immediately from the incoming entries and there had been no outgoing mail in the account, so they'd put the puzzle aside until morning.

"We didn't look at the drafted but unsent emails last night. There are a number of them."

"What do they say?"

Jack looked toward Weston. "Commander?"

“Go ahead. I’ve got a call into my cousin about the information and the future attacks planned, but we’ve no orders yet about what to do. We’ve got about twenty more minutes before we have to be on post at 0630.” His cell phone vibrated. “Well, speak of the devil.” Weston left the room.

Jack met her gaze and the grave seriousness in his eyes gut punched her. She grabbed the back of a dinette chair. “What is it?”

“The email drafts are a diary of sort. An account of activities planned and executed with cold precision.” He turned the computer her way and clicked on the message. It began: *The first move is the assassination of Imam Hassan Omar Aziz in Iran...*

Her mouth went numb, her body shook, and her brain fogged with pain and disbelief. “You mean Bill was an assassin? He went around killing people?”

Jack flinched, his gaze turning darker, his mouth grimmer. “Of sorts. If you read further, you’ll find he didn’t actually do the dirty work. He was more of an intermediary. He hired the necessary people, made sure the job was done, then paid the men—one way or the other.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that risks to the operations received bullets rather than the promised cash. Both of the men who framed the US and Israeli Military for Aziz’s assassination were executed. No evidence of who really committed the crime was left behind, except for your husband’s account of the event.”

Lauren shook her head, sat down, and buried her face in her hands. “I, oh God, I know this is real, but I just can’t believe all of this. A murderer. A killer. What else? What else is there lurking in the shadows that he lied to me about?”

Jack flinched again, as if she’d attacked him personally, but answered her, his voice stark. “The attacks on the oil refineries and reserves worldwide. The kidnapping of Ambassador James’s and Prime Minister Shalev’s daughters.”

Lauren snapped her head up. “In Lebanon? That’s where you were hurt. That’s where you saw Bill.”

“Yes. My Delta team went in to rescue the women.” A muscle in his jaw ticked. His expression was haggard. He was clearly struggling with something. Then he met her gaze head on. “Bill was there and...I killed him. Shot him to death with a spray of bullets from my machine gun. He died at my feet.”

Lauren reared back at the harsh ugly reality of the situation and Jack’s hard voice. She’d understood Jack had a job to do. Bill had been involved in something bad. But...Jesus...couldn’t Jack have told her this before now? Her entire world spun in turmoil, one of horror and pain over the reality of what Bill had done and just how he had died.

Jack had come to her asking about Bill. He hadn’t necessarily deceived her, but... “You killed Bill. You didn’t tell me.”

“Guilty. There’s no excuse for what I let happen between us. I did try and tell you. I am no better of a man than Bill was. I’m sorry. I suck at relationships anyway.” He stood. “We’ve got to go to the post. The

CIA and NCS will be there shortly. They are going to have more questions than you can answer and they are going to turn you and your sons' lives inside out. They will leave nothing unexposed until they've reached the bottom of the cesspool Bill was in. I'm going to do what I can, but it's going to be rough."

Pain slashed through Lauren even as her mind spun from the revelations about Bill. Jack's knife went deeper than Bill's betrayals. That was it? That was all Jack was going to say about them together. That he sucked at relationships anyway? Lauren met Jack's gaze disappointed for the first time since he knocked on her door. "You're boiling everything we shared down to, 'I'm sorry and I suck anyway'?" Anger bubbled inside of her. She wanted to yell, but clenched her teeth instead. "What was it, Jack? Pity fucks for a deceived widow?"

He looked as if she'd punched him, which only made her feel worse. "Yeah. It was what it was." He collected the computer and left the room, his back and manner as hard and cold as steel.

Lauren fisted her hand against her aching heart and fought the burn in her eyes and her gut. She didn't need Jack. She didn't need anything but her sons back in her arms to protect them and someplace to disappear. She had a life to rebuild for them and come hell or high water nothing and no one was going to stop her from doing that. It occurred to her as she left the kitchen that she hadn't asked who Bill had worked for. If her husband had been the intermediary then someone had to be calling the shots and that someone just might be the SOB after her.

Jack and Weston were waiting at the door. Lauren grabbed her purse and waited until they were in the car to ask some of the questions starting to perk in her shocked brain. Weston and Jack were in the front, she sat in the back.

"Who exactly did Bill work for?" she asked. "Is BioLogics behind all of this?"

"BioLogics was nothing but a cardboard front for a bigger entity," Jack said.

"What entity?"

"We're still trying to piece that together," Roger Weston said. "In the diary of information, Bill called the man he worked for as The Man with the Yellow Hat."

Lauren frowned. "You're kidding. As in Curious George?"

"Yes." Jack shifted quickly her way. "Do you have any Curious George books in your house?"

"Yeah. One or two I think. The boys are into Thomas the Tank Engine, so we rarely read Curious George." Eyes wide, her voice rose as her vision literally turned red. "You think Bill put evidence in his sons' books that people would kill for?" Rage curled deep into her gut.

Jack and Roger shared a look.

"You need to tell her," Jack said.

"What?"

Weston continued, "Considering the scope and ramifications of the terrorists acts detailed by your husband—"

“No,” Lauren interjected. “Just call him Bill. Makes my stomach turn just a little less acid.”

“The President is ordering a joint agency task force to investigate this.”

Jack spoke up. “Which means they could be raiding your house now, looking for evidence, looking for clues. Looking for the identity of his employer.”

Before they reached Bragg, Roger Weston received a call asking for him to bring her and Jack to a different place.

“I don’t like this,” Jack said as they drove up to the private residence just outside Fayetteville. Two men dressed in black and carrying guns guarded the gated entrance.

“Where are we?” The queasiness in Lauren’s stomach intensified.

“A National Clandestine Service hideaway.”

“Like that helps.” Lauren looked at Jack, incredulous. “I’m going into the lion’s den. One out for blood.”

“I’m right here with you.” Jack looked back and met her gaze as they drove through the tall gate and up the wooded drive. Emotionally he was as distant as when he marched out of the kitchen, but he was holding to his promise to protect her. “Just tell them the truth about everything and you’ll be okay.”

“You obviously don’t read the news,” she said.

“I do. Maybe I should have said I’ll make it okay.”

“Don’t promise.” Weston’s voice was thick with something dark and painful. “Sometimes making things okay isn’t possible. All you can do is the best you can.”

The trees broke to reveal a plantation-style Southern mansion with armed guards out front. Queasy turned into a sour knot of nausea as Lauren exited the car and a hard-nosed, bald man with the personality of a hundred-pound bowling ball barreled out of the house and began shouting orders.

Her goal was to get to the truth as quickly as possible so she declined their offer of an attorney, but soon regretted that she didn’t take them up on the delay. She had no idea how hard it would be. Her rage at Bill grew and became a solid ball of something close to hate as she underwent grueling hour after hour of questioning. The NCS bowling ball with the official title of SOO and insisted on being called “director” was relentless, repeating questions, discounting her answers, and prying into every second of every minute of her life from the moment she met Bill until today. Her and Jack’s investigation into Bill’s activities had been taken over by heavy-handed men with little care for or interest in her as a person. She was a means to an end to them.

She had to give Jack credit. He didn’t leave her side and he put his face into the NCS man’s face every time the man stepped out of line. Jack had almost come to blows with the man several times. Once had been at the onset, when they’d been determined to interrogate her alone, and Jack informed that wasn’t going to happen. She’d either be with him or she’d postpone until she found an attorney.

Six hours? Seven? Eight? She'd lost count. They supplied caffeine and food and water, but her throat was still raw from the strain and her mind punch drunk.

Finally they slid a piece of paper in front of her and Jack and asked her if she knew what it meant. Her eyes were blurry by this point and she had to blink it into focus. Then she read the words on the page and dread gripped her by the throat.

...the real prize will be won when green world burns and Earnhardt, Jrs win the race with the super formula in their tanks.

"OH MY GOD." Lauren grabbed Jack's arm, reeling, her heart slamming wildly in her chest. Even her vision blurred. "The boys' birthday presents! Bill sent them Dale Earnhardt, Jr. race cars. Surely he didn't put something inside them. Please. God. No."

Jack pulled her into his arms, but she could barely feel him against her.

"We're done here," Jack told the man. "The boys are in Disney World with a Delta teammate and their godmother. The cars are with them."

Lauren practically bit through her lip; her fear for her sons was all consuming. Jack pulled out his phone.

"Shit, I have a missed call from Rico. Do you all have a cell jammer set up?" He hit voice mail. The men only shrugged.

"I have Collins's sons. I'll call back. Maybe."

The bottom fell out of Lauren's entire world, pain and terror ripped her apart.

Chapter Thirty-One

1600 hours

Jack grasped Lauren's shoulders as she reeled. His gut clenched, sickened with dread. If someone had Lauren's sons, odds were Rico was dead.

"Matt. Mitch." Every breaking crack in her heart wrenched painfully in her whispered cry. She grabbed the front of his shirt, looking into his eyes. God she'd been through so much, how could she take more?

The depth of terror in her gaze matched that in his heart.

"Who, Jack? Who has my sons?"

"I don't know." Having to say those words killed him. He'd failed to keep them safe.

Lauren pushed back from him and faced the hard-nosed NCS SOO who asked everyone to call him Director as if he were the only official in existence. The ass probably didn't want people knowing his name.

Lauren's devastation erupted into rage. "While I've been telling you every damn detail of crap that doesn't matter, my children were kidnapped!"

She balled her fist and slammed it down on the paper. "Where did this come from? Why didn't you show it to me earlier?"

"It was the fax sent from Bob Cantrell. My men have been looking for a code."

A man stepped into the room. He left the door open and Jack tensed as he assessed the stranger's aura of lethal power and rage hidden beneath a thin veneer of civility.

"The fax sent THIS MORNING?" Lauren sucked in air, drawing Jack's attention back to her. She was livid and he couldn't blame her in the least. He knew how things worked when it came to investigating and interrogating acts of terrorism, and even he was enraged at the delay in seeing the fax. A delay that may have cost Rico his life.

Before Jack could speak up, Lauren's anger exploded and Jack thought she'd plow her fist into the SOO's face. "Code!" she yelled. "My sons are now kidnapped because you delayed hours and hours before showing me this! I'll tell you code. The cars are the birthday presents Bill sent the boys and the 'real prize' must mean what someone is murdering people to get and 'green world' doesn't have 'the' in front of it, so we aren't talking the earth but a particular place or—Jack!"

Lauren turned to him, her eyes wide, incredulous. “GreenWorld! Could Bill be referring to the corporation the man on TV owns? The one with the new fuel and the primate preserve? The man with the chimp?” Her eyes widened. Do you think he is the man with—?”

Jack’s pulse raced. “The yellow hat?”

“Good. Damn good,” the stranger said in a Scottish accent. Jack in no way liked the man’s assessment of Lauren.

The director turned to the stranger. “Rash, about time you arrived.”

“Just in time.”

“You already knew who the man in the yellow hat was?” Lauren’s outrage was gale force.

“No.” Rash’s expression was coldly harsh. “I’ve discovered Andreas Miles is Juan Pablo Menendez, but hadn’t made the connection to the mastermind behind Bill Collins’s account of the worldwide meltdown.”

“Menendez?” Jack searched his memory. “The infamous drug lord who disappeared Jimmy-Hoffa like ten years ago?”

“One in the same.”

Jack clenched his teeth, fighting a wash of pain and guilt. He prayed Rico and Angie were alive, but odds of that with Menendez were bad. The drug lord had built the bloodiest, the most ruthless cartel in all of South and Central America. He’d been responsible for the deaths of thousands over his twenty year reign and toward the end, Menendez had a chimp, a chimp known as Murderous George. Jesus. They had to get to Matt and Mitch fast.

Lauren shook her head. “Why would the chimp-loving billionaire take Matt and Mitch?”

Jack cursed. “GXP.” He picked up the faxed letter from the table. “*“The real prize will be won when green world burns and Earnhardt, Jr’s win the race with the super formula in their tanks.”* With the oil market in chaos, the biofuel will be worth billions. If Collins worked for Miles and stole the formula, my bet is Miles wants to trade the boys for the GXP formula.”

“But he already has it now if he has the boys,” Lauren cried.

“He doesn’t know that,” Jack said. “We’re likely the only ones who do.”

“We need to locate Andreas Miles.”

“You don’t need to do anything,” the SOO said. “We’ll handle everything from this point. We’re already looking to confirm Miles’s coordinates. He left Florida thirty minutes ago, destination Brazil according to the flight plan.”

“He could fly anywhere if he knows we’re onto him.” Jack said.

“We’ll take care of it. You and Mrs. Collins can take a break,” the SOO said.

“Excuse me.” Lauren put her face in the man’s. “Did you just say I can take a break? My children are kidnapped and YOU WANT ME TO TAKE A FREAKING BREAK! What are you going to do to get my children back?”

The SOO blinked. “Ma’am, we’ll do everything we can when the time is right. We lack concrete evidence. For now, we’ll be observing Miles’s every move.”

“What about my children? The right time is now.”

“We are doing all that we can to locate them. Until we know more, there isn’t more that can be done.”

Jack slid his arm around Lauren’s shoulders. “Come on.”

“Jack, I can’t just walk away. My children are—”

“I know.” He urged her firmly out the door. He was so angry he thought he would lose it. The right time to get Matt and Mitch back would be the moment Menendez/Miles landed his plane, before the bastard had a chance to hide them anywhere. And Jack for damn sure knew who the right men for the job were and it wasn’t the CIA or NCS or anyone else. Delta trained day in and day out for this sort of situation.

Think, Jack told himself, clamping down on his emotions. He had to keep his head cool.

Commander Weston was there. “You won’t believe—”

“I heard,” Weston said. “Follow me.” He headed back through the richly decorated house to the double doors leading to the driveway and their car. He stopped by a fountain in the foyer where water spewed from the beak of a swan into a pond surrounded by fragrant flowers of bright blues and deep reds. The warmth of afternoon sun, the suburban ambience of the décor, and the rich comfort surrounding him might as well have been props for a Hollywood set. He had an uneasy feeling about everything.

Weston’s voice was barely above a whisper when he turned to Jack. “You’ve got to back down. I see the fight in your eyes. We’ve been officially relieved of this situation. I got the call just after we arrived.”

“What does that mean?” Lauren said.

“Means we aren’t going to be invited to the party,” Jack said, bitter. “We’re out of the investigation and when they take down Miles and rescue your sons, we won’t be in on the action.” Jack frowned at Weston. “That’s it. You’re not going to push back on this one? You’re going to let them shut us out? We’re the right men to get her sons out.”

Weston ran a harried hand through his hair as he exhaled. “Orders are orders, DT. This comes all the way down the pipe from the President. Paul is calling for an international crisis summit to be held to deal with the fallout. NCS needs believable proof that Menendez is behind it and they can’t make a move on him until they have it.”

“They can have the investigation, Commander. I’m talking about her children and getting them out of there before they’re collateral damage in all of this.”

“You’re too emotionally tied to this one, DT. We have our orders.”

Jack clenched his fist and bit back another retort. Weston wasn't going to change his spots. He always towed a hard policy line. Jack was usually in agreement with his commander when it came to following orders, but ever since he woke up in the hospital, Jack and orders were not getting along. And neither was his memory, something about the Rash guy bugged him. "Who is Rash?"

"Rashid McGuire. CIA. Was in charge of the Alvarado Rescue in Columbia. Haven't heard anything about him in the decade since. I get the idea he's running the show. Heard from the guards that Rash already led a raid on the corporate offices of BioLogics and GreenWorld Corporation before dawn today."

"Alvarado? Wasn't that the family on vacation, who were kidnapped and murdered?" Lauren asked, frowning. "There was no rescue. The drug cartel slaughtered them all even though the family paid the ransom."

Jack met Weston's gaze. They both knew what went down in Columbia. The ransom hadn't even been attempted yet. The CIA had moved in to rescue and everyone had been executed by the time the operatives reached the family. "Things just keep going from bad to worse," Jack said. "This Miles/Menendez character is sure to be on his guard after the raid, if he hasn't already gone to ground. What about news on Rico?"

"I have the team in Orlando already on it. Nothing yet"

"Wait a minute? Neither of you answered my question. What really happened in Columbia?"

"When we're alone," Jack said. "Right now, let's focus on what's being done to locate Miles/Menendez and where he is taking Matt and Mitch. What is NCS doing about it?"

"I don't know," Weston said. "Folks here are keeping tight control and we're out of the picture." Weston glanced at his vibrating cell phone. "I've got to get back to Bragg." Weston turned toward the door.

"We're done here," Jack said. "We'll come with you." To hell with the CIA and official channels. He'd call in every favor in the book to find out where Lauren's sons were and how to get them home safe. He caught Lauren's arm, urging her toward the door. She gave him a pointed look that sharply reminded him of how he'd left things between them that morning. Jack bit back a curse, his heart and conscience smiting him. He should apologize for leaving things the way he had this morning, but just like then, there was no getting around the facts. He was what he was, a man who took lives. He'd taken Bill Collins's life and nothing was going to change that. Her revulsion when she thought Collins killed for a living was the same as he'd gotten from his ex. Lauren's horror and anger at Collins had given Jack an out and he'd taken it.

Lauren pulled free of his grasp and followed Weston. Jack told himself that it was just as well to leave things as they were. Still, it ate at his craw to reduce great love making to pity fucks.

Weston opened the double entry doors and two armed guards dressed in tactical gear moved to block the exit. Jack snapped his mind into gear as he immediately assessed the situation. His earlier uneasiness justified itself in seconds.

“Sorry, Lt. Col. Weston, sir, but I can’t let SFC Hunter or Mrs. Collins leave.”

Weston paused and glared at the young man. Jack knew just how powerful Weston’s ire was and almost felt sorry for him. The kid took a step back but did not move from blocking the way.

“We’re prisoners here?” Jack swung around and confronted Rashid McGuire, who came up behind them.

“Consider yourselves houseguests for a short time. It’s necessary for your safety and ours.”

Weston snorted with disbelief. “Keeping Mrs. Collins under wraps I can understand, but keeping my man is overkill and reeks of bullshit. You’ve got no grounds on which to hold him.”

Rashid shrugged. “Just following orders. Take your complaints up with the Deputy Director.”

Jack expected that Weston would argue more, come out with a bigger stick and use the threat of his presidential connection, but he didn’t. Instead Weston’s phone vibrated again. He glanced at the screen then met Jack’s gaze. “I’ll call you shortly, DT—”

“You’ll have to call either Director SOO’s number or mine. We’ll be taking his cell in case Menendez calls back.” The man rattled off the numbers.

The tone of Lauren’s interrogation had indicated that they’d likely detain her, but Jack hadn’t mentioned it, not wanting to cross that bridge unless he had to. And now that it was here he didn’t feel all that great about it. She’d be relatively safe from assassins in this cushy prison. Safer than he’d been able to keep her. Another chill ran down his spine from what almost happened at Gardner’s. But Jack had news for Rash, his SOO, and the NCS; putting him into that same box wasn’t going to wash. He’d be damned if he was going to sit here with Rico missing, no matter how many brass pipes the orders came down in. He’d be out of there tonight come hell or high water.

Lauren stepped forward to give Rashid a piece of her mind and Jack, blindly sent Beck a coded message from his cell in his pocket.

Blindfolded, gagged and tied like a sacrificial lamb, Conrad had been thrown into a trunk, driven for hours, then stuffed into a crate. Now he was being flown to only God knew where. The SOB who took him down had yet to say another word. Conrad didn’t count it a good thing that he was still alive. It wasn’t the burning fire in his shoulder that made him wish he was dead, it was the five million dollars he was sure he’d now lost. The man knew about Bill’s letters, had confiscated them and would likely be buried up to his balls in greenbacks soon.

It made him sick. He’d done all of the hard work and this bloodsucker was going to reap the rewards?

Snapping wood and prying metal grabbed his attention. At least they weren’t burying him alive or dumping him in the ocean. A rush of cool air met his skin, then rough hands were jerking him up. His every numbed muscle screamed in pain and his injured shoulder protested louder. The blindfold was snatched off.

He blinked against the burning brightness of the light until his eyes adjusted. By then his mind separated the fact that while his muscles were in horrendous pain, the actual screaming he heard was from Bill Collins's brats clinging to a red haired woman he'd seen before. The boy's crying instantly became a heavenly choir singing Hallelujah in his ears. Another chance at getting the five million and maybe more just fell in his lap. Life was looking up.

He cradled his arm protectively and moved in to play hero. "Dear God! They got you too. Where's Lauren?"

They looked like Bill Collins, Andreas thought as he watched the video feed of his hostages being freed from their crates. Two miniature Bill Collins cowardly huddled against a red-headed woman who had his murder glaring in her eyes as she looked about. The new Fidel was proving to be a man of his word. He not only planned for the next step, but also was deviously resourceful. He'd been able to smuggle five hostages aboard the Airbus A380 via crates disguised as supplies. They'd refueled, filed a flight plan, and were on their way inside of an hour. His *Santaurio*, his fortified haven awaited them.

George jumped excitedly in the seat next to him.

"Patience, *mi hijo*. You will see the boys when we get home. *Pero*, you must be careful not to hurt them until I have what Collins stole from me." George loved to do things that made children laugh. Collins's monsters would laugh. Eventually cry again. Then they would scream.

Two men were also unloaded from the crates. One was completely unconscious or dead and had blood staining his blue shirt. Andreas dismissed him and focused on the other man, who was stretching and smiling at the boys as if he'd just found heaven itself. This man had been murdering others for Bill Collins's letters, of which Andreas now had most of on his desk in front of him. He'd been thoroughly shocked and pleased to find that Collins hadn't put convicting evidence in the letters but had alluded to Andreas as the man in the yellow hat. Lauren Collins held the key to the evidence of Andreas's crimes. Bill had promised each of his friends a million dollars if they worked together with Lauren to bring down the man in the yellow hat.

All Andreas had to do was get the formula for GXP back, make a few people permanently disappear, and then he could get back to assuring a future for George and his kind. International authorities, provided they would ever be able to collaborate again, couldn't touch him with anything more substantial than the man with the yellow hat.

So he'd proceed with the *Latimoor Live* CNN interview on GXP's facilities and the wildlife preserve tomorrow and pretend as if nothing was wrong other than he was an innocent man.

Once the oil facilities in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah were burning, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan would learn he couldn't steal from Andreas Miles. For now he'd let Lauren Collins stew until she was desperate to give him anything he wanted for her

sons. Once he had GXP back he could then get back to the task of reshaping the world for global social justice.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Roger left the NCS hideaway with the feeling that he'd abandoned DT on the battlefield. He almost turned around to force Rashid McGuire's hand in a "my daddy's bigger than your daddy" pissing contest. One call to his cousin and Roger was sure word would reach Rashid with the speed of light directly from the Deputy Director.

The only reason Roger didn't make the call was to keep DT from carrying through with the determined rage in his eyes. Roger had no doubt DT would go after Menendez/Miles, which is why Rashid was detaining him.

So Roger had driven away and kept on driving no matter how he felt about the situation. Orders were orders. Miles/ Menendez and what Bill Collins had done were now out of his hands and out of DT's whether they liked it or not.

Putting aside the world-wide destruction the terrorist acts caused politically, economically and socially, Menendez was responsible for creating the crisis in Lebanon—an event which had resulted in tragedy. Something everyone involved would suffer from every day for the rest of their lives. No death would be slow enough or torturous enough to make up for the damage Menendez had done.

Roger clamped down on his anger and shoved his focus in a different direction. It wouldn't do him any good to dwell on the situation, but he could channel his fury elsewhere against a more than deserving bastard. Frank Dugar. The man who had attacked Mari.

Mari rested in his apartment on post in the care of Senior Airman Holly Gear from the 116th Air Control Wing division of the Air National Guard from Warner Robbins, Georgia. Holly was a top graduate of the National Guard's Sniper School and was teaching at Bragg in the unique position of informing men on how to think like a woman sniper. More and more women from hostile, radical factions around the world were being trained as snipers, leaving the US Troops and Special Forces vulnerable. Unless you were in her rifle sights, Holly was easy going and single, two reasons why Roger had called her to stay with Mari when he, Jack and Lauren had been diverted to the NCS hideaway.

Before returning to post, Roger went to Neil and Mari's house. He had a list of things she needed and he wanted to check if the windows had been boarded up and the cleaning crew had cleared away the debris. Until Dugar was caught, Roger wasn't going to replace them.

The collection of butterfly and flower themed wind chimes lining the front porch hung in tatters, peppered with bullets, still and quiet. Amid the silence and the damage lay remnants of Neil's life. His and

Mari's wedding picture. NASCAR memorabilia. An autographed picture of Marilyn Monroe posed on a 1957 Chevy Bel Air Convertible, an exact replica of Neil's car, his pride and joy. Neil's football trophies from little league games and from high school. The big screen TV and the circle of sofas where the team would gather for Super Bowl and World Series showdowns, maybe even a fight night or two, depending on who was in the ring. Roger could almost hear Neil laughing, smell the Doritos, pizza and beer, and see him relaxed in the recliner with the remote in his hand.

This was the result of Menendez and Collins's act. This was the ghost Mari had been living with since Neil's death. Roger's heart kicked hard and his soul tied into knots. He moved toward the bedroom at the end of the hallway, practically blinded by emotion.

The wind chimes on the porch clamored and Roger froze then quickly registered the fact that something was pressing his shin through the material of his jeans. He wouldn't have felt it had he not come to a complete standstill at the sound of the chimes.

Looking down, he saw a trip wire had been rigged across the hallway. From the set-up, Roger had no doubt that he stood in the blast zone of an IED.

Trouble was, he had no idea just how sensitive the triggering device was. Would it blow if he backed away from the line?

The chill that scraped down his spine was followed by a full body sweat of terror. He barely breathed as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and called Officer Cain, who could assure nobody came barreling into Neil's house. God only knew what else might be rigged.

"Officer Cain," the policeman said.

"Lt. Colonel Weston here. We have a situation."

"Sir?"

"I'm at Neil Dalton's house. I'm alone. I'm in the hallway to the bedrooms to be exact. The place has been booby trapped. I have likely partially triggered a bomb. How many more there are here is anyone's guess. I need the bomb squad. And nobody but a fucking expert had better come near this place. If my ass is going to blow up, I'm going to be the one to do it, and not some idiot. Clear the perimeter and proceed with caution. The wind chimes outside went haywire just a minute ago and there was hardly a breeze when I arrived, so somebody may be lurking in the shadows. I'm calling my superior. They may send help as well. Any questions?"

"No."

"Hurry." Roger disconnected. Sweat trickled down every groove and dent, making him itch places he hadn't felt since stranded behind enemy lines and under fire. His body, heart and soul screamed at him to move. To get the hell out of there as fast as he could.

His mind even rationalized that he'd be quick enough and would likely even escape death if he were to thrust himself back down the hall. But he forced himself to stay put. To wait. To sweat. And to relive his

life in a flash. There were few regrets and they boiled down to Lebanon, his men—Neil, DT, Beck, Rico, Pecos—and Mari.

He called General Alex Dekker next, prepared for an ass chewing because this would be the second situation to—ha—blow up in Roger’s face that he’d yet to appraise Dekker about. The first being DT’s involvement with Lauren Collins, the CIA, her terrorist dead husband, and the case’s connection with the whole Lebanon cover up. Roger hadn’t made that call until this morning when he had proof in hand. He’d purposely kept his mouth closed about Mari’s ordeal as well. He hadn’t wanted any strangers butting in. Mari wasn’t dealing well with strangers since the attack and she was already pushed to the edge.

The general answered.

“Houston,” Roger said. “We have a problem.” Roger went on to explain his current predicament in Neil Dalton’s house and what had transpired with Mari Dalton over the past forty-eight hours. “Bomb squad is on its way.”

“I’ll have men there inside of ten minutes,” General Dekker said. “Meanwhile, shit, Roger, keep your ass intact, will you?”

“Planning on it. But do me a favor, if things don’t go as planned, would you...”

“Son of a bitch. Anything, just tell me. You’re in for one hell of an ass chewing.”

“Would you personally see that Neil’s wife and his baby are protected and provided for? And my men, DT, Rico, Beck, Pecos, see that they end up good. They’ve given their all for the team and deserve no less.”

“Yeah. Make it a double ass chewing. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” Roger disconnected and dialed Mari’s number.

“Mr. Wes— Uh, Roger, are you all right? You’ve been gone a long time.”

He cleared his throat, thinking her voice sounded like an angel’s, something every man on death’s doorstep craved to hear. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just...just delayed. I had a few extra minutes and thought I would check on you. Is Holly still with you?”

“Yes. She has been very kind.”

“Good. Humor me a minute. There’s been so much happening that I never got the chance to ask. Tell me about the baby. What your and Neil’s plans were for the little one. Names, hopes, dreams. I’d like to know.” Roger shut his eyes as Mari spoke. The flood of things he’d yearned for from the bottom of his soul, but had never found the time to make happen, was overwhelming considering he might be living the last minutes of his life.

“What other clues or discrepancies can you point out?” the man called Rash asked as he handed her Bill’s letter. They’d changed their interrogation room from an office to the kitchen, likely hoping the cozier atmosphere would get them better results. The only two things that had changed was the once welcoming scent of coffee now turned her stomach and she’d come to the realization that these men didn’t make a move without calculating it first. Cold. Methodical. Relentless.

All the men surrounding her in her cozy little prison—Rash, two guards outside the front door, maybe more on the grounds, and Jack—were strong, capable, trained fighters. Men whose mere existence made her want to shake them and scream because they were completely equipped in every way to rescue her sons. They had the skill to do it. The force of the government behind them. And they were **DOING NOTHING** to rescue Matt and Mitch and Angie. They just sat here asking **HER** questions.

She scrubbed her face with her hands, staving off the tears that kept clawing to the surface. Were she to give into them, she wouldn’t be able to stop. Couldn’t these men see she was bleeding all over the floor as if someone had slit her spiritual wrists? Her sons. Dear God, her sons and her best friend were in the hands of a murderer. Angie wouldn’t be in danger now if Lauren hadn’t brought her into this mess.

Several deep breaths helped Lauren gather enough calm to survive—for another few moments at least. She could only think about making it through one minute at a time, telling herself to breathe, telling herself that Matt and Mitch would be all right, telling herself that at any minute she’d be able to hold them in her arms and never let them go.

She had long passed the point of being able to tell the authorities anything new or significant about Bill. And since learning about Matt and Mitch, she’d answered all of their questions the same. “Until you bring me Matt and Mitch, I have nothing else to say.”

THAT was the only relevant or important point at the moment.

Everything around her was filtered through the thick fog of pain that her sons had been taken, and she couldn’t seem to think or feel about anything else. Even what happened with Jack yesterday and this morning was removed from her by layers of hurt, anger, fear, terror and frustration. She had to get to her sons. She had to get to Andreas Miles, but how?

Sure she understood the global ramifications of the terrorist acts Bill had helped orchestrate. And she realized the CIA, NCS, and every other acronym had to aggressively investigate in order to stop any future attacks, but she didn’t know anything about any of it. Meanwhile her sons were in immediate danger.

That the men were agitated with her was an understatement. Except for Jack, he’d leaned back in his seat with an angry smirk. He didn’t like being held prisoner either and her stubborn resistance either amused him or satisfied his desire to stick it to the bowling ball SOO and the scary Rash McGuire at the moment.

Everything that had happened over the past forty-eight hours plus since Matt and Mitch's birthday party ran through her mind like a sick reality show, one with a garish billionaire with a chimp and— Oh, hell yes!

She stood up so fast that the blood drained from her brain and her vision wavered a minute before settling out. "I need some fresh air."

"There's plenty of air inside," the SOO said.

Lauren glared at him. "Afraid I'll leap the deck in a single bound? Race like a speeding bullet?"

"Better call your watch dogs." Jack rose, opened the French doors, and gestured for her to precede him out the door. "Because I think she could very well do both right now. Why don't you two smarten up and give her some news about her kids."

She passed him, praying the idiots would take Jack's advice. Then she went directly for the steps leading down to the ground. The sun, already low on the horizon wouldn't be around for long. Nights were cooler in North Carolina, with a hint of fall in the breeze. She turned her face to the brushing wind and the fading sun and blinked back the bite of tears in her eyes. God she was a mess.

A fountain and a goldfish pond centered the perfectly landscaped grounds and she went directly to it. The perimeter of the Better-Homes-And-Garden yard eased into thick trees and, Lauren suspected, a walled security fence with guards beyond that. Nothing like being hog-tied while having her heart ripped out.

An apt description for her situation.

Jack kept pace with her and she spoke low, where only he could hear, making sure she faced away from the house. These kind of people read lips and she didn't want them to know what she had to say. "Do you think they can hear us now?"

"Technology wise it's possible. Odds are they aren't that equipped here. This whole situation came about so last minute that I don't think so. Why?"

"First tell me about the Alvarado family in Colombia."

"Lauren, you don't need to do this to yourself."

"Just tell me, Jack. For once be open and don't hold back what you can tell me just because you think it's for my own good, or God forbid, you do what those guys back there do, and coldly calculate and control everything."

He exhaled as her sharp words hit home. "An attempt to rescue the Alvarado family was made, but by the time the operatives reached the family inside the compound, they had been executed."

"And the drug lord who did it, was it Menendez? The man who now has Matt and Mitch?"

"Rumor has it the Colombian drug lord was a peon for Menendez's cartel. Menendez had likely ordered the executions."

"This Rash person. He led the rescue attempt?"

"Yes."

“So my sons are in the hands of brutal killer who is criminally insane, and the government has appointed a man to save my children whose whole purpose is focused on revenge against Menendez?” Tears of frustration and fear flooded her eyes. “My sons aren’t important to anyone.”

“They are to me.” Jack grasped her shoulders, looking into her eyes.

The turmoil she saw, gave testament to the fury of the emotions within him. He might be calm on the outside but inside he was raging.

She drew from that strength and placed her palm over his heart, pressing against the soft cotton of his pullover. “Then help me, Jack. I might know how to reach my sons without alerting Menendez,” she whispered, her own heart pounding with hope and fear. Jack had to take her seriously.

“Lauren, this is not—”

“You expect me to wait around for a repeat of the Alvarado family? Just listen to what I have to say. The live CNN interview with him is tomorrow afternoon. Remember Angie saying that *Latimoor Live* would feature Andreas Miles at his research facility in Peru? If he hasn’t cancelled, then we can go in as part of the camera crew. There’d be equipment to hide the weapons and a filming entourage for cover. Matt and Mitch have to be with him. Or we can at least find where they are being held prisoner.”

“The US has probably picked up Menendez on satellite by now. Once his plane lands there will be pictures of all activity around the plane, including vehicle arrivals and departures. If they identify the landing site in time then they’ll have agents on the ground monitoring as well. If your sons, and I pray, Angie and Rico are removed from the plane and taken somewhere, we should know. But what you’re asking to do is to coordinate a high profile government operation with a news reporting team on a case with worldwide ramifications. That’s practically impossible.”

She grabbed his shirt. “No. Jack. Not the government. Not those guys in the house. But you and a few good men could do it and would do it if one of your own was a prisoner and was about to be executed. I know it. Make the impossible happen, Jack. Save my sons. Don’t let them end up dead.”

The last thread of control holding back her pain broke and the tears flooded. Her heart hurt so much for those she loved that she could hardly breathe.

Jack didn’t answer her as he pulled her into his arms, but he didn’t say no either.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Every muscle Roger owned had spasmed and cramped in the two hours he stood without shifting a fraction of an inch from the waist down. The bomb squad was on the scene, as well as several explosive experts from Bragg, sent to consult thanks to some major string pulling by General Dekker. And all of the experts were focused on one thing—saving his ass.

He had no complaints.

Though the full bomb regalia covering him was heavy as a tank. He hoped, but doubted, it would save him if the IED detonated before they disarmed it.

And before the squad could do that, the police had to evacuate the area, shut down the natural gas, and search for other bombs first.

They found two more. One in the bathroom attached the commode flusher and the other in Mari's bedroom, wired to explode when she turned on her bedside lamp.

The sick mind behind the booby traps chilled Roger to the bone. Vindictive. Personal. Lethal. And insanely obsessed. Frank Dugar had declared a war on Mari and just as soon as Roger made it out alive, he was going to war.

It wouldn't be much longer now. An expert was currently working at Roger's feet. He had to hand it to the bomb squad team. There wasn't a rushed bone in their bodies. Every movement was painstakingly slow as if they were in some time warp. Considering every natural instinct was to run like hell, Roger concluded that the men who did this day in and day out had to have titanium balls.

"Commander Lt. Col. Weston, sir. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Was anyone ever ready?

"Just so you know, sir, had you backed away from the trip wire, you would have been a goner. On my count of three, I want you to step back."

"One. Two. Three."

Roger moved back and kept easing back until he exited the front door. The bomb suit was designed to protect against the blast in the front. In the back it provided cushion, especially to the spine, to absorb the shock of impact. With every step he thanked God and then prayed like hell for the man who was still defusing the bomb. Once outside, other members of the bomb squad were there, helping him, leading him off the porch into the yard and removing the bomb suit. He clearly would now live no matter what

happened inside, but Roger didn't breathe with any relief until the man he left behind made it out safely as well.

He didn't see the media circus at the police barricades until then. Every major news station in Fayetteville was on the scene with their high-powered cameras rolling. They were likely giving Dugar the biggest jolly of his life. Any hope of Roger's name staying out of the news was practically nil.

Roger faced the cameras with the full force of his rage. Bring it on, he silently muttered to the coward after Mari. You want a fight, then fight like a man.

Mari couldn't believe it. She sat glued to the television screen with Holly right there with her. After she'd spoken to Roger earlier, she'd been unable to just rest or read. She'd kept thinking about all the things brought to the surface by Roger's question about her baby. All of her hopes and dreams, all of Neil's that he would never see come to fruition, and the almost desperate need she had detected in Roger's voice.

It had reminded her of his nightmare and vulnerable, hurting depths behind his solid façade. Something was wrong. It wasn't until she turned on the television that she found out what. There on the screen was her house, front and center. The bomb squad was on scene, hoping to save a man trapped inside. It was then she realized why Roger had sounded so strange. With every passing second of the drama, her heart wrenched both in fear for Roger and in the realization that she had to leave the safety he'd given her.

"Son of a bitch," Holly said as the camera zoomed in on Roger standing in Mari's front yard. "I'm going to kill him for not telling us."

"As long as I am here, he will be in danger." Mari was filled with her fear for Roger and the resignation that she'd have to leave.

Holly rolled her eyes. "Haven't you realized the dudes around here totally thrive on danger?"

"Danger in a war zone when they are expecting enemy fire. Not danger in their home. He was almost killed today because of me."

"You can't look at it that way. You have to realize that if someone else had gone inside your home—you, a neighbor, a friend—they would likely be dead now. Here, we train day in and day out for things like this."

Mari's eyes widened. She hadn't asked Holly any personal questions and had assumed she was the wife of one of the soldiers. "You? You train. What do you do here?"

"Mainly, I teach the men how to think like a woman sniper. Occasionally, I get into a pissing match with one of the guys on who the better shot is, especially when they start ragging that I just got lucky with my record holder. Then I have to prove myself on the range where I usually win their respect. Guys are like that with women. You can't tell them anything and have them really believe it. They've got to see it with their own eyes."

“So you teach them how to shoot too?”

Holly shook her head. “Don’t know how well that would go down in the ego department. Besides there are snipers in the war whose kill range are close to a mile and a half. They are the legends a man wants teaching him. What I do here is tell them how a woman sniper might think and react in different situations. I also try and make these men realize that when a woman joins an army and uses guns or bombs to fight in a war, she becomes another soldier and they have to reprogram their minds when it comes to gender if they are going to survive.”

Mari looked down at her bandaged hands. Would she be in this shape if she’d learned some of what Holly must know? Would she have been raped by those men? Would she be putting Roger’s life in danger now? The possible answer to those questions spoke volumes to Mari. She couldn’t do anything at that moment. But she would.

She’d probably have to leave to keep Roger from being killed by the madman after her, but she didn’t have to be helpless anymore.

2200 Hours

Jack quietly paced the floor. It was time for him to break free of their cushy prison. The guards would be expecting him to try something in the o’dark thirty sweet spot, which is why he was bailing now. Conveniently for him, Lauren had fallen asleep, despite how impossible she believed it. Sometimes the body overruled the mind. Her physical and emotional exhaustion had been past the point of staying sane, but she’d kept it together, hoping beyond hope that her plan to rescue her sons would come to fruition. She’d been watching CNN since they’d come upstairs to rest. She’d looked for any news on Menendez/Miles and whether or not the live show scheduled for tomorrow night had been canceled. So far it hadn’t. In fact, the host of *Latimoor Live* had made an announcement earlier that she’d be seeing everyone from the wilds of Peru tomorrow evening.

Whether Jack wanted to admit it or not, and as impromptu as it would be, Lauren’s idea had taken root in his mind. Provided satellite data backed up the facts and all assets were available, going in disguised as part of the camera crew could even be considered ideal. He—

“Now an update on the averted bombing in Fayetteville, North Carolina involving a high ranking military officer.”

Jack whipped around at the headline and stood stunned at the video feed. The Sandman’s house was on national news as was the man emerging from the bomb suit. What the hell? Jack shook his head in disbelief. Commander Weston’s image, though at a distance, was unmistakable. Jack glanced at the time the video was taken. A little over two hours after he’d left here.

Jesus. Where was Mari? The bastards after her had to have planted the bombs. He reached for his cell only to find his pocket empty. He clenched his fists. Damn. Enough was enough. More determined than ever, Jack left the suite of rooms he was in with Lauren and quickly made his way down to the kitchen. Nodding at each guard he passed, he mentioned food. One guard accompanied Jack into the kitchen and watched Jack's every move. He wasn't sure why any highly usable utensil had been removed. No sharp knives or skewering forks, but then, any professional worth his salt didn't need the obvious. So it was almost an insult that they'd removed them.

He raided the refrigerator, piling high two plates with sandwiches, potato salad, fruit, pickles and chips. Before he left the kitchen, he put popcorn in the microwave. The aroma would quickly permeate the house and set every man's mind on his stomach. It was the munchy hour of the late evening. That time just before bed when everyone human got antsy for a taste of something good.

Plates held prominently, Jack returned to the bedroom, enjoying the envious looks on the guard's faces. The CIA might have a hidden listening device, but Jack found no evidence of video surveillance. Not that he didn't think the SOBs capable, he just didn't think time had permitted them to set up a fully equipped prison. With the TV running, Jack left it up to their interpretation of what was going on in the sitting room. He placed the food plates on the coffee table, pulled two Coke cans from his pockets then turned to Lauren.

The urge to wake her up and tell her he was going and would see her soon was overwhelming as was the urge to kiss her one last time, to simply hold her one last moment and recapture the way she'd made him feel when wrapped in her arms.

But she'd want to go with him and she couldn't. She was safer here.

She'd want to go to Peru and there was no way that would happen.

It wasn't her fault. Despite her lack of training, she'd performed perfectly and had proven her competence. It was he who couldn't handle it.

Couldn't handle the thought of what almost happened at Gardner's. Lauren hadn't said much, but from the look in her eyes, Jack could extrapolate what plans the man had and it made even his hardened edge crawl with sick dread and rage. That whole scene from first approaching Gardner's house until the bullet gave him a permanent part in his hair played repeatedly in his mind—wouldn't let him go for some reason.

Jack blinked, sucked in air. She'd stirred up things inside of him that he didn't want to remember, much less examine.

His emotional reaction to Lauren's exposure to danger wasn't too far from the fears his ex-wife had expressed, fears that had begun with her pregnancy with Livy. Fears he'd acknowledged, understood, even empathized with, or so he'd thought he had. But fears he'd refused to let rule his life.

Now that the shoe was on his foot, he found the fit really uncomfortable. Maybe he hadn't been as empathetic as he should have been. It was somewhat different. He had years of training and experience. Still, the hypocrisy tried to nail him to the wall, but he side stepped it. She didn't have what it would physically take to get out of the CIA holding area undetected.

Disgusted with himself, Jack moved over to the French doors leading out to a sundeck three stories above the ground. The windows on the first and second levels of the house had been security wired, but third hadn't. Likely because there was no outside access to the third story from lower floors. Staying deep in the night shadows, he aligned his body with a deck post, gained the railing then the shingled roof. The pitch wasn't ideal, but doable, given he stayed flat against it.

Halfway around he froze in place as men's voices from below reached him. Orienting himself, he pegged them as coming from the deck outside the kitchen. Rashid and the SOO who called himself director were the talkers.

"I'm not buying her act, Rash. You know how these SOBs are brainwashing blond-blue-eyed American's for their cause. She's got what it takes to get past any profile barrier. And there are just too many coincidences for her to be as innocent of Collins's dealings as she claims. Connect the dots going back even just a year. Her brother goes MIA outside of Kabul, within weeks the majority of our camps are ferreted out by al-Qaeda—not the Taliban—then al-Qaeda attacked two supply convoys, all of which he had knowledge of. Add that to the fact that her husband is in Lebanon when radical al-Qaeda's number two man happens to show up? There's no way Qassem just happened to stop by for a visit. He was there to collect the Ambassador James and Prime Minister Shalev's daughters from Collins. Collins, her husband and her brother, all blond-blue-eyed Americans are as thick as thieves with al-Qaeda. Where do you think the millions in the bank account came from?"

"Doesn't matter what we think, we don't have a confession, and we can't prove anything against Menendez."

"You want her to talk? I say we isolate her from the sap who's bought into her act. Then we get our hands on her children and we keep them from her until she spills. It might take a week or so, but she'll cave."

Fuck. Jack rested his forehead against the rough shingles took several deep breaths and made his way back to Lauren. Surely he wasn't a deluded sap?

Lauren woke to the sound of the TV and the pungent smell of pickles. She sat upright with a start, shocked that she'd given in to any sort of weakness when her children were in danger. She saw someone had bought them food, but the thought of putting anything on her churning stomach made her feel ill. Rising, she moved away from the food and headed toward the bathroom, thinking Jack must be in there washing his hands to eat.

The bathroom was empty.

The bedroom was empty.

The balcony door was open but the balcony was empty with no steps leading downward.

Her heart hammered and sank.

Surely he wouldn't have just left without her?

When are you going to wise up about men, Lauren? You suck when it comes to character.

No! She almost covered her ears to shut out her thoughts.

Maybe he was in the hallway talking to the guards. She moved across the room, had her hand on the door knob then froze. If Jack had left, then she'd be the one to sound the alarm and he might get shot running away.

Gritting her teeth against the frustration and hurt, she paced across the room twice. Was Jack going to go after Matt and Mitch without her? Not that she wouldn't want him not to go if she wasn't with him, but dear lord, he could at least take her to Peru, let her be close so she could see her sons sooner.

If Jack could escape what was stopping her from doing so? What would be the worst that could happen? They'd catch her? They weren't likely to shoot her, because they really thought she knew more than she was telling. Going about the room, she gathered her purse and few things she might need. The heavy cord tie-backs to the curtains might work for something. And she pocketed the mini-air freshener. They'd confiscated her mace along with her cell phone.

Outside, she determined the only way to escape was to go up first. She thanked God it was too dark to see the ground as she climbed onto the rail and searched for a hand hold. She hated heights and had to keep reminding herself that this was the only way to reach her sons. Unfortunately, that first step proved to be harder than she thought it would be; she wasn't tall enough to gain a good grip onto the roof. Heart pounding, she wavered for a dizzying moment. Then, through the shadows, she made out the drain spout in the corner of the deck and moved her position to reach it. She wrapped a curtain tie back around the spout above the bracket anchoring the metal to the brick, stretching on her tip-toes to reach it, but soon had a decent knot and an intermediate step to the roof. It wasn't a set up she'd trust with her whole weight for a long time, but it would do.

Seconds later she had her hips at the roof line and enough leverage to shimmy up until her toes locked against the overlapped shingles nailed around the roof's edge.

She'd done it! Breathing heavy, she contemplated her next move, which could only be to the right or to the left. The roof was warm. The air was cool. The night was quiet. She—

A hard body slid into place next to her and a heavy hand on her back pressed her stomach against the roof.

"Don't move."

Chapter Thirty-Four

“Jack!” Lauren whispered, recognizing his scent and touch. Turning her head to see him was more than she could manage at the moment, though. “Thank God. You didn’t leave me after all. I was so—”

“Your brother, Lauren. Tell me about your brother.”

She exhaled as if punched. “Jason? He went MIA a year ago in Afghanistan.”

“Don’t forget to whisper. Why would Rash and the NCS bozo be talking about him?”

“They know something about Jason?” Hope filled Lauren and she reared up in shock and would have tumbled from the roof if Jack hadn’t anchored her by rolling his body half over hers. “Oh, God. Can we get on the ground first? I really hate heights.”

“Yet you’re on the roof.”

“Only because it’s too dark to see the ground.”

His chest heaved. Had he laughed at her?

“It’s not funny. Please. Hurry. I’ve waited so long. What did they say?”

“Only that he was MIA and wondered if he was involved with your husband’s activities.”

“No. Jason and Bill didn’t even speak to each other.” Lauren’s spark of hope fizzled.

“Rash and the SOO bastard are to the right. We’ll go left. Stay with me.”

Jack led Lauren to where the roof of the garage and its attic slanted upward, making it easier to drop to the ground. She no sooner gained her footing then Jack swung her around into the shadows and pressed a hand over her mouth as he slid his body flush to hers against the trunk of a nearby tree. She understood why when the sound of steps through leaves reached her ears.

The patrolling guard didn’t waver, but kept coming, directly at them. The sound of a zipper, a man urinating followed. Then came the gasping cry of, “What the hell—?”

The guard didn’t get the chance to say more, Jack pivoted into a crouch and swung low. The man doubled over and Lauren air-freshened his eyes with the spray from her pocket before Jack chopped the back of the man’s neck and he fell to the ground, unconscious. Lauren handed Jack two of the curtain cords from her purse. Jack cuffed and gagged the man then propped him against the tree.

For some reason after it was all over, Lauren felt as if she’d drunk wine. Her head spun and the oddest thoughts kept creeping up.

“You wouldn’t have been able to do that to a woman guard,” Lauren said after they gone a good distance from the house and were hidden by the heavy cover of thick trees.

“Why is that?”

“A woman would have held it until she was blue in the face before she’d pee in the woods. So all the easy-pee envy is misplaced. Men are more vulnerable.”

“Can’t argue with you. Dicks are usually at the root of a man’s downfall.”

“A woman’s too,” Lauren said. Jack didn’t laugh and she bit her lip, trying to stem the rising need to giggle. Her head spun more, her thoughts kept jumping crazily and her hands shook

Jack’s butt looked good. He had a great one. Well, he had a great everything too, but his butt was something. Did he know? She opened her mouth to tell him then remembered she was mad at him. He had a stubborn butt too. She decided to keep her mouth shut and doggedly followed him until they reached a barbed-wire fence about five-feet high. Her body tingled but also seemed numb. She felt so weird.

“Don’t touch the fence until I disable it,” Jack said.

She frowned at the barbed wire. “Do I look like I want to become a pin cushion?” She wavered on her feet. More than her head was spinning now.

“It’s electric,” Jack said.

“Funny. The door to door salesman said the same thing. Only his angle was you didn’t have to worry about batteries. Just plug and go.”

“Vacuum cleaners?” Jack asked.

“Vibrators,” she said. “Guess he figured he’d corner the *Desperate Housewives* market. Police nabbed him before he reached the end of the block.”

Jack laughed.

“I don’t feel so good.” Lauren’s knees gave out and she pitched forward, right toward the fence.

He leaped between her and disaster and plowed her backward. She landed on the ground, minus her breath with Jack on top.

“Jesus, are you hurt?” he asked.

She gasped for air, unable to speak just yet.

He rolled off her like lightning and began running his hands all over her.

“Are you bleeding? Did you hit your head? Damn it, Lauren, talk to me. Tell me what’s happened? I’ll never forgive my—”

Lauren shoved her fingers into his mouth. She meant to just press them to his lips, but misjudged.

Jack shut up.

She laughed, still lying on the ground, flat on her back as if she wasn’t in the middle of the worst crisis a parent could imagine. Had she lost her mind? “I don’t know what’s wrong. Ever since we fought that guard, my head keeps spinning. My body is numb and I’m shaking. I can’t think. And my thoughts are—”

Jack sucked on her fingers as he pulled them out of his mouth, sending a white hot pulse of pleasure through her. She may have felt it, but she definitely wasn't dead. Not by a long shot. He leaned over her and planted his mouth on hers. He kissed her hard. Mouth to mouth, chest to chest, tongue to tongue.

Before she could assimilate that, he jerked away from her and went digging into his pockets. He came up with a peppermint and a mangled piece of gum.

"Sorry. I couldn't stop myself. Next time you want to discuss dicks and vibrators, don't do it after an adrenaline rush, okay. Eat the mint and chew on the gum until we can get you some food. The adrenaline bottomed out your blood sugar. You haven't eaten since yesterday and you've put nothing but coffee in your system all day."

Jack's kiss had left her heart pounding, her lungs breathless, and her mind doing summersaults. Somehow she couldn't blame all of it on adrenaline. The funny thing about it, she was still angry and pissed over this morning, but none of that seemed to be important at the moment. He was with her and they were escaping and they were going to save her sons. That's all that mattered.

Jack had the taxi drop him and Lauren off a block before Beck's house. He didn't think anyone other than Beck would be here waiting for him, but he wasn't taking any chances. The escape from the NCS hideaway had been just too damn easy. He got the fact that the place had been a last minute thing. He got the fact that he and Lauren weren't hardened criminals, but still. It shouldn't have been that easy.

After he had disabled the electric fence, they followed the tree line to the neighbor's house and had them call a taxi, saying their car broke down on the street. Within fifteen minutes they'd hit a fast food restaurant for food, which was consumed in minutes, and were on their way to Beck's house.

Jack's inner gut was sending him warning signs again. What was he missing with the NCS set up? He finally had to put the puzzle aside, knowing that whatever was off just might come around and bite him in the ass much like what was off at Gardner's nearly put a bullet through his head. He had other things to worry about now.

Like could he still count on Beck?

Jack took Lauren the back way, through the wooded lots to approach Beck's house from the rear. He cleared the trees enough to see the silhouette of Beck's back porch and noted that all of the lights in the house were off. There didn't seem to be a creature stirring anywhere—

"About time you showed up, DT."

Jack whipped around and grinned to see Beck, gun in hand and ready for battle, a streak of war paint on his cheeks and his long black hair loose. Jack smacked Beck's shoulder. "You aren't human, you SOB. Smoke makes more noise than you do."

"It's been a long afternoon." Beck bear hugged Jack's neck, nearly choking him, making Jack feel really good. Beck was back. Jack could sense it.

“Sorry for the delay.” Jack registered the fact that Beck had immediately prepared for an emergency and had been waiting outside for Jack to show since Jack’s message earlier. “I hadn’t realized it would take as long as it did to escape the NCS’s clutches. The interrogation went on and on.”

“Escape the Company? Is she?”

“An operative? No. Lauren Collins. Meet Beck Walker, a direct descendent of Ghost Walker, a Native American legendary tracker who moved like a phantom in the night.”

Lauren shook Beck’s hand. “Descendent or reincarnation?”

“Both.” Beck smiled.

“How long have you been behind us?” Jack asked.

“Since you came onto the property. Had to make sure the lady was friendly. It’s not like you to bring company.”

“Long story you won’t believe.”

“Can’t be too long. You’ve only been out of Reed three days. I stopped—” Beck motioned for silence and to get down. He pivoted as he crouched, his Beretta in hand.

Jack pulled Lauren down beside him, as he pressed a finger to her lips.

“Someone’s coming. Stay here.” Beck moved away without a sound. A few minutes later, Jack heard Commander Weston’s voice.

“Damn it, Beck. This isn’t necessary.”

Weston soon appeared, moving their way in the dark, his hands held up. It took Jack a second to realize Beck was moving Weston this way at gunpoint.

“What the hell are you doing, Beck?” Jack demanded.

“Watching your back.” Beck shoved Commander Weston forward, the moment became surreal. Beck had Weston at gunpoint? *Jesus*. Jack had never heard Beck this angry, nor had Weston ever looked so grim.

Weston seemed to have aged a decade in the past few hours, his face appeared drawn and haggard.

“Whatever is going on, the gun isn’t necessary. Can it now,” Jack said.

“You don’t know all of the facts. And I bet he’s here to turn you in,” Beck said. Still he eased his Beretta back, and moved to Jack’s side to face Weston.

Weston lowered his hands. “Rashid called General Dekker. I figured you’d come here.”

“So you’ve led them a merry trail right to him?” Beck interjected.

“Actually, Holly Gear is in my car leading them a merry trail to nowhere. No one followed me here. I made sure of it.”

“I believe him.” Jack shifted his gaze from Weston to Beck. The tension between them was so thick that Jack doubted even a machete could hack through it. What was up? “We’ll talk about the NCS and why I’m here in a minute. First things first.” Jack met Weston’s gaze. “I couldn’t believe the CNN report. Glad your ass is intact, Commander.”

“Damn. Was my name mentioned?”

“No. I recognized you though. Was it the psycho after Mari?”

“Yes.”

“What’s this?” Beck asked.

Weston didn’t say anything and Jack filled the void. “The commander spent the afternoon trapped in Neil’s house with a couple of bombs. Mari was attacked the other day at a convenience store. Hit the wrong person with the door because she was crying too hard to see and he came after her. She locked herself in the bathroom and called 911. The man left, but threatened to kill her. She spent the night in the hospital. The man’s name is Frank Dugar. Mental case with ties to the Viper Militia in Washington state.”

“Dear lord,” Lauren said. “It’s unbelievable a man would react like that.”

Roger shook his head. “Mari’s traditional Muslim and was wearing her head covering and gown. With the political uproar over the terrorist attacks between the West and the radical Islam, the man targeted his hate at her.”

Lauren grabbed Jack’s arm. “He did this,” she whispered. “Bill did this and it’s happening all over the world.”

Jack took Lauren’s hand. “Collins may have set the stage, but evil is in the hearts and minds of individuals. They’re the ones responsible.” Jack looked at Weston. “So he booby trapped Mari’s house?”

Weston nodded. “He had a wire across the hall in front of her bedroom. I partially tripped it before I realized it was there. He also rigged the commode and her bedside lamp. I should have expected something like that, though, after he took a few sniper shots at her when we left the hospital yesterday. Mari is really shook up and frightened out of her mind.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Beck demanded, even angrier than before.

“Who the hell can tell you anything?” Weston shot back. “You’re either drunk, don’t answer, or too ragged out from other shit to deal with anything else.”

“You two want to tell me what’s going on?” Jack asked.

“Yeah,” said Beck. “I do, but I CAN’T.” He gave Weston a hard look.

Weston sighed as if the world on his shoulders just doubled in size. “I can, but let’s go sit down.”

They moved inside. Most everything in Beck’s was handmade by him; a mixture of Native American style and the solid Early American craftsmanship that had been lost in today’s mass production. The old world atmosphere gave an added comfort to the earthy tones and soft cushions of the wood framed sofa and chairs. Tomorrow would be the third day of non-stop hell and little sleep, and his body ached tenfold. He welcomed the comfort and to be able to let down his guard for a moment. Or so he thought.

“There are a few things you need to know about what happened in Lebanon,” Weston said.

Jack tensed.

“While standing in Neil’s house waiting for the IED to blow me apart, my life separated into two piles. Things I regretted and things I didn’t. A good bit of what went down in Lebanon went into the regret pile. Though I’m not sure that I wouldn’t make the same decision again, given the circumstances.”

Jack started to speak, not even sure what he was going to say, but Weston held up his hand. “Hear me out, DT. Just know that every step I made, be it the right step or not, I did the best that I could and at any moment I would have given my life to save any one of the teams.”

Weston scrubbed his face and ran a harried hand through his hair. He met Jack’s gaze and didn’t waver. “Everything was in line and moving smoothly for the mission. Beck’s team on the perimeter and your team moving through the building, searching for James and Shalev’s daughters. You reported heavy gunfire, as if pinned down on the second floor.”

Jack’s body began to sweat and tremble. He remembered that now. The four of them had thought they were goners. He had to force his mind back to what Weston was saying.

“Then communications went dead and all signs of life ceased as if your entire team had been wiped out. A truck full of insurgents pulled up to the entrance. Men ran into the building and a man with an entourage of guards entered as well. Beck reported the man’s identity and the continued sound of gunfire from inside the building.

“That man was Muhammad al Qassem, DT, the mastermind behind the death of thousands of Americans. Given the data, the absence of signs of life, I ordered a Samson missile strike to take out Qassem. God knows how many more Americans the man would kill if he escaped.”

Jack stood, hands fisted, body shaking harder. “Son of a bitch! The nightmares. They were real. There were two explosions. One from the outside then one from below. I was in the hallway going to help Neil. We’d found the hostages and were on our way out. Neil was blown back—”

Weston stood and grabbed Jack’s arms. Jack focused on Weston’s face, feeling as if he were being whirled in a tornado. Tears ran from Weston’s eyes. “What we now know is the terrorist had developed a jamming device that wiped out the signs of life, communications, and even interfered with the Samson’s GPS. The missile hit between the terrorist stronghold and the building next door. There were explosives being stored in both buildings and those explosives detonated, causing severe damage to both buildings. Qassem and his insurgents died. Neil died. You, Rico, Pecos, Shalev and James’s daughters were injured. But that’s not all. There was a makeshift orphanage set up in that second building as cover for the terrorist. Three children and two women died in the collateral damage from the Samson.” Weston released his hold on Jack and turned away. The pain Jack saw in his commander’s face wasn’t bearable. Weston struggled to breathe. “The decision to hide the Samson strike and blame the damage solely on the stored explosives came from the White House. It was, and still is, feared that Islamic radicals would use the tragedy to escalate a world war. Beck, me and the few others who knew of the missile strike were sworn to silence.

Even those injured in the collateral damage were not to be told. The more who knew, the greater the chance of the wrong people finding out and the odds of more people dying and being hurt because of it all.”

Jack turned away, hurting as his mind grappled with everything Weston had said. As a soldier he registered the facts and processed the logical progression of events and decisions. Intellectually he understood every one of them, even if he didn’t wholly agree with every point, he clearly saw the big picture. Emotionally, a maelstrom of hurt, anger and disillusionment had him by the throat.

“Jack.” Lauren came up behind him and pressed her cheek to his back in wordless comfort and support.

He drew a deep breath and turned around, squeezing her shoulder in thanks. He looked at Weston. “Why are you telling me now?”

“Because when I stood on death’s doorstep today, I realized there are some things I can live with and some I can’t. Considering the inhumane depravity that gets excused in a heartbeat around the world, I can live with them not knowing an American missile played a role in the Lebanon tragedy, but I can’t live with my men not knowing the truth. So I made the decision to tell each of you. What you decide to do with that information is up to you and I will face whatever consequences I need to that result. Just know that as Commander I made the best decision I could with the facts I had at the time. I’m sorry, DT, sorry you were hurt so badly. Sorry to have kept the truth about what happened from you. If I could trade places this instant, I would.”

Jack drew several deep breaths. “I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t trade places. Given the facts, I don’t know if I would have ordered the missile or not. I keep seeing Neil blown against the wall, keep feeling the building cave beneath me, keep hearing the screams of pain, maybe my own. Comparing the damage in Lebanon to the devastation of Qassem’s last attack on American soil, the decision to take him out had to be made. But that’s why you’re a commander and I’m not. Somebody has to carry the responsibility to make critical choices in a crisis and live with the burden of them. We both know there are no good choices or winners in war. Consider your apology accepted.”

“That’s it?” Roger shouted. “You can forgive me that easily? Jesus, DT. Your career might be over.”

“What? You want me to waste time and energy beating you to a pulp? Seems as if you and Beck have already done enough of that. Hell, Roger. I don’t know what I feel yet. I don’t know what to do yet, but I sure as hell know what has to happen next. I’m not waiting for Rashid’s right time. I am going to get Matt and Mitch out of Menendez’s hands. Are you with me or not?”

“We’d be disobeying direct orders from General Dekkar.”

“Did he say specifically do not go to Peru and rescue Lauren’s kids?”

“No. Just to turn over the investigation to the NCS.”

Beck cursed. “Somebody want to tell me what’s going on?”

“In a minute,” Jack said at the same time as Weston.

Jack smiled. “Then we won’t be disobeying. We turned the investigation over to the NCS. No more investigation necessary just action.”

Weston smiled. “Good point. My orders from Dekker are to find you. Guess I’m going to have to go to Peru and infiltrate Menendez’s digs to do it. Isn’t that right, Beck?”

“Sir?”

“Have you seen DT, Beck?”

Beck smiled. “No, sir.”

“Where do you think he is?”

“Peru, sir.”

“Good. I have transpo waiting.”

“And I have—” Jack paused and looked at Lauren. “Make that Lauren has the perfect plan.”

Weston and Beck looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. And maybe he had.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Madre de Dios Region, Peru

Amazon Rainforest, Santuario Compound

1100 hours

“Can I do anything else to make you comfortable?”

“No. You’ve been wonderful,” Conrad told Angie. And she had. Ever since they’d all been unpacked from crates yesterday, she’d been the angel of mercy administering to him, the brats and the other dude, who he hoped would soon be dead. Conrad kind of liked Angie and he could tell she was interested in the other guy. It was in the way she looked at the dude and touched him, it made Conrad want it.

What would his life have been like if he’d met someone like her in high school, or even college? She wasn’t the cheerleader type, always flaunting their T&A and being so picky on who got snatch and who didn’t. She’d have been the one in the library studying. He should have read a book more often.

Not that he’d had to do without back then. Some had put out just because he was the football star and for the few dry spells, well, he had some good dirt on one of the cheerleaders and she gave him what he wanted when he wanted it just so he’d keep his mouth shut. Those had been the good old days.

“I don’t know where I would be without your help,” Conrad told her. “Probably dead. Ever since they blew up my boat and shot me in the shoulder when I fought them after I made it to shore, I thought for sure I’d die.” He let tears well into his eyes and then blinked hard and drew a deep breath.

“It’s going to be all right.” She leaned closer and squeezed his shoulder. Her full breasts jiggled nicely. She was braless beneath her shirt. He’d watched her take it off last night and use it to make a sling for the other dude’s broken arm. Hell, Conrad’s shoulder was in bad shape, he could have used a sling as well, especially one that had been in contact with her tits.

If the monkeys outside weren’t screeching during the night then Collins’s damnable brats were crying, making sleep nearly impossible until the din of early morning birds made it completely impossible. Conrad had a headache and the brats were running around, racing their cars everywhere in the set of rooms they’d all been locked in after leaving the plane.

Conrad had decided that when the opportunity presented itself, he was going to suffocate the other dude with a pillow, paving the way for him and Angie. And the first chance he got he was getting rid of those damnable race cars.

“Thanks,” he told Angie, and raised his good hand to pat her arm. She looked at him and he thought she was going to say more, but then that other dude groaned from the next room.

“Oh thank God. Rico’s waking up.” She left, dropping Gardner like a hot potato.

Not good. Not good at all.

He motioned to one of the boys as they passed and they came over to him. They would be the key to getting to Angie. He made them laugh a bit then quietly manipulated them into a doozy of a fight. As predicted, Angie left the other dude and came running to deal with the brats. She scolded them and took their race cars away for a ten minute time out. Good. Very good.

1300 Hours

George did an excited flip and landed directly in front of Collins’s sons the moment they were pushed through the door. Both boys cried out and fell back. From the surveillance video of the prisoners’ rooms, Andreas had watched the boys when separated from the red-haired woman. She was still beating against the door, demanding that the children be brought back to her when he’d left the screen a few moments ago.

George jumped in a circle and laughed at the boys, pointing at their faces.

“*Madre de Dios*, George,” Andreas agreed. “They are exactly alike.” He frowned at the boys because they hadn’t laughed yet. George loved for children to laugh. “You like my son, don’t you, *chicos*?”

The boys nodded.

“He likes you too. So you must laugh when he does a trick. You don’t want to make him mad. Not yet. George, why don’t you show them how you race like a car?”

George screeched and then ran fast across the large room. He jumped on chairs, swung from the chandelier and the curtains as he whined like a broken siren. He ended with a flip, landing right in front of the boys again. One of the boys laughed. The other one cried out and backed up another step. George screeched at him and pushed him.

Andreas frowned. “He wants you to laugh,” he told the boy who looked as if he was going to cry. That would only make George sad then. This play session wasn’t going as well as he’d planned. Andreas glanced at the time. The CNN camera crew would be here shortly to set up for the *Latimoor Live* show and he really didn’t need George in a bad mood. Why wasn’t the boy amused?

“Show them your guitar, George.” The tinny sound of “Hey, Hey, We’re the Monkees” played as George strummed his play guitar and jumped up and down. This time both of the boys laughed. “Hey, Hey, with Monkey,” one of them said, singing along with the song.

The boy reached out and touched the guitar and George screeched and grabbed the boy’s hand. “No!” Andreas told George, stopping his son from biting the boy.

Andreas wasn't ready for blood yet. He needed Lauren Collins's cooperation. Besides, he'd want to have a video keepsake of it all and that hadn't been set up.

Now George was upset. He crawled in to a corner and was glaring at the boys, who were now huddled together by the door.

"Fidel! Come quickly," Andreas called.

Fidel hurried into the room and snapped to attention.

"Take them back. They have only upset George! It would serve them right if I just left them for George to play with as he will." Fidel left with Collins's rude children.

Andreas went over and picked up his son and caressed his cheek. "It's all right, *mi hijo*. I will find you some playmates, don't you worry. Those *chicos* were mean. I had the same problem, but we'll take care of teaching them some manners very soon. It's money that made them bad. They had more than others. Just you wait, everyone will have the same and you and your kind will be just as important as everyone else. Even those bad *chicos*. Maybe you'll be more important."

George lifted his head and smiled, baring his teeth.

Andreas smiled back. He'd tell Fidel to speed up with the attacks against Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and he'd make the call to Lauren Collins tonight. The sooner Andreas got what he wanted, the sooner George would too.

The Angel of Mercy was crying and he would be her hero. Conrad went to where Angie had her cheek pressed hard to the door. They'd just pulled the two boys out kicking and screaming with Angie doing her best to disable anything she could reach and now she was alone and defeated.

Conrad set a firm hand on Angie's shoulder and urged her away from the wall. She needed to have those breasts smashing against him and not cold concrete. "Hey, don't do this to yourself," he told her. "It's going to be all right. We're going to get out of here. The boys are going to be fine."

She looked up at him, and damn, why did women cry. It did nothing but mess up good stuff. Her nose was red, her eyes were running, and her skin was blotchy. "I know. I know. It has to work out that way, anything else is unacceptable."

"Angie. Angie?" The other dude in the other room called out.

Angie snapped her head up and nodded. "You're right. It's really going to be okay. Rico is getting better by the hour." She patted Conrad on the cheek and ran to the other dude.

Jaysus that man had to go. Conrad followed. He needed to make an assessment of the other dude's condition, so he'd have a good idea of what would be needed to take him out tonight.

Conrad stopped at the doorway. The other dude was sitting up on the side of the bed. His bloody shirt was gone, leaving his torso bare except for Angie's bra anchoring the man's broken arm against his chest. The man held his head in his good hand and moaned.

Angie went right up to him and placed her palm lovingly on the man's cheek. "Oh, Rico. Thank God. You're fully awake now? You remember what happened?"

"Yeah. How long? How long have I been out?"

"Long enough to have me on my knees begging for a miracle, buddy. Almost twenty-four hours."

"Where are we?"

"Not sure yet, and don't know who had kidnapped us, but we are in a Spanish speaking country."

"Where are the boys?"

Angie drew a deep breath. "They just took them away, Rico. God, I tried to stop the guard, but...I...couldn't." She started to cry again.

"Shit." The man put his good arm around her and hugged her to her, squashing those glorious breasts against him. "Don't worry. I'll get to them. Help me get upright so I can start getting my shit together. I'll— Who the hell is he?"

Conrad smiled as Angie looked up. *Your executioner, asshole.*

Angie smiled. "Conrad, this is Rico. Rico, this is Conrad Gardner, a friend of Bill Collins's who has been kidnapped too." She motioned for Conrad to come into the room. "You're just in time to help."

"Any way I can." Conrad moved into the room. It nearly killed him to help the other dude to get upright when all he wanted to do was snuff the life out of the bastard.

The dude wavered wildly, nearly fell back down then forced himself to steady. "I got it now." The other dude released his hold on Conrad, taking a few steps on his own.

Suddenly loud crying penetrated the room. The brats were back.

"Dear God." Angie left the other dude and ran.

Rico moved forward, braced his hand on the wall and followed Angie.

Conrad had never heard such a ruckus. He went with everyone into the living room. There wasn't a scratch on the boys but they were sobbing. Angie had both of them in her arms on her lap. "Tell me what happened, Matt. Please. No matter what just tell me."

"Mean monkey," Matt said. "Bad man and mean monkey."

"The monkey did tricks and the man wanted us to laugh," Mitch said. "Then the monkey got mad. I thought he was going to bite me. He's bad."

"What man?" Rico asked. "Describe him. Did he say his name?"

The boys shook their heads. "He was just a bad man," Matt said. "He called his monkey George. He said the monkey was his son."

Angie gasped. "You're sure, Matt? You're very sure."

"Of course he's sure," said Mitch. "I'm sure too. We give our solid oak, Aunt Angie."

Angie looked at Rico, her eyes wide with shock and confusion. "I know where we—"

Rico pressed his finger to Angie's mouth, a mouth made for bigger and better things, Conrad thought. The man looked around the room. "Hold that thought. The walls have eyes and ears," he whispered.

Well, damn. Conrad hadn't thought about that. He couldn't afford to have a tape of anything untoward surface. He'd have to wait to off the other dude. But that was all right. He had plenty of time, and he still had a chance at the five million jackpot.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Loaded, ready to rock and riding in style, Jack swept his gaze over the occupants of the stretch Hummer then made one last check on the demeanor of the guards in the guard house. The two men were relaxed and joking and had only given the contents of the news van a cursory glance. They never even questioned the people in the luxury SUV. The infiltration was proceeding well. It was the ex-filtration he was worried about.

Besides him, Weston, Beck and Lauren, the only other person with them who knew exactly who they were and why they were here was Candace Latimoor. Everyone else believed they were a wildlife photography unit here to take additional footage of Andreas Miles's Primate Reserve.

All elements of the operation had seamlessly coalesced except for the one thing they needed the most and had the least amount of control over. They had no satellite photos. No proof that the hostages were with Menendez. He never landed at the airport cited in the flight plan they'd filed after leaving Orlando, where surveillance agents had waited. Once reaching Brazilian airspace, Menendez's Airbus A 380 diverted to a private airstrip, which given the size of the plane had to be one hell of a private facility. Heavy cloud cover made photos of that airstrip sketchy, but a humongous hanger was apparently the Airbus's parking garage. All loading and unloading had been done beneath its steel walls and all trucks had been driven through the dense tropical foliage to somewhere inside this compound.

From what he could tell, the visible security fence and gate had all the bells and whistles of a maximum security prison. If they were forced to get past it to escape, it wouldn't be a piece of cake but was within the team's capabilities.

It had been raining since their early morning arrival to the rustic capital of Puerto Maldonado, but as ill luck would have it, the afternoon had cleared, adding to the biggest negative of the operation—daylight. But between rainforest vegetation and their camera props, the team should be able to maneuver around enough to scope out the area and hopefully locate Matt, Mitch, Angie, and Rico—at least Jack was praying so. Rico's body had yet to turn up in Orlando.

Jack had been to the Brazilian Amazon rainforest before, but hadn't realized just how vast and virgin the Peruvian side was. On the drive he'd seen several scarlet macaws, their blue, red and yellow coloring unmistakable amid the lush green forest.

Lauren was with them. He still wasn't sure how it had happened, but had finally come to grips that it was the right thing to have happen despite his fears for her. She'd stay with the camera crew and he'd

contact her when he'd hopefully located her sons. From that point, it would be decided if the live camera feed would continue to film Menendez's interview, or if they'd be able to capture the rescue of the hostages on tape. That would be sure proof of Menendez's involvement with Bill Collins. Besides, live TV would be a pretty big deterrent against a show of violent force on Menendez's part in stopping their escape from the compound.

The choppy black wig Lauren had on had changed her general looks from golden and angelic to a sophisticated, sexy goth that would fit right in with New York's trendy fashion and just what a hungry reporter in training would look like. She sat next to Candace Latimoor. The silver haired, tanned and lively, fifty-something woman had a deep voice and a direct humorous manner that hit somewhere between Larry King and Jay Leno.

When the driver rounded the bend, a collective gasp rose from Latimoor's crew. Jack had been semi-prepared for the massive size and space-aged architecture of Menendez's facilities from grainy satellite images. Still the scene was like driving up to a James Bond movie set. The look he shared with Weston and Beck said they thought the same thing.

Once the cars rolled to a stop the situation started moving fast. Outside humidity heavily weighed down everything. The muggy temperature was ninety-degrees and stayed that way year round in the Amazon Region, great for rainforest vegetation, hell for everything else.

Lauren found him in the chaos of unloading equipment. Their hands met and held as did their gazes. All their hopes and fears lay bare between them and he had to swallow hard and slice into his own gut to stop from tossing her back into the limo and send her to safety.

"No matter what happens from this point on, thank you," she whispered and brushed his lips with hers and left him. It was then that Jack finally realized the biggest deterrent in having a personal connection to the mission. It wasn't necessarily because emotion might cloud a decision. He'd trained for so many years that most of the right moves were instinctual and instantaneous. No, the reason any warrior should stay the hell away from a personal mission was because of what Jack was feeling at that moment. If he failed, he doubted he'd be able to live with himself.

Lauren went with the Latimoor crew and all of their equipment inside to set up for the show. Jack, Weston and Beck went to the supply van, pulled out an official-looking large HD video camera, one that had a few little features tapped onto it. One called the Big Easy, a listening device that picked up the faintest of sounds, displayed them on a screen, and identified them. The other was a Thermal Imaging Camera. All of them wore ear devices for communication and were armed to the max now that they had their camera bags in hand.

Beck wore the big camera on his shoulder. Hopefully they'd only use the non-lethal weapons, stun guns and tear gas. The bullet proof vests they wore beneath their oversized Ts would be their only tactical

protection and it was weird as shit to be tackling a mission with nothing more on their side. So not their typical blast in and blast out style.

CNN press badges in hand, they set out on foot to give the perimeter of the facility and any outlying buildings a once over. Their plan was to check them first for Matt and Mitch, and Jack prayed, Angie and Rico, before moving to the main facility.

Even though it was strange walking into a situation without being fully decked out, it still was damn good to be active again. He didn't know what his future held, but he wasn't completely out of fighting the battle against the evils rampant within the world.

Pegging the security barracks was easy. Muscle sat on the porch smoking. The team moved on doing their best to attract as little attention as possible. Jack snapped pictures with a hand-held Sony and Beck used the monitoring equipment. The thermal camera enabled him to pick out guards in the shadows and in the foliage.

"What are you doing?" one armed guard shouted at them in Spanish.

Jack, Weston and Beck stopped but pretended not to understand. They showed them their CNN badges and mimed that they'd like to get the men's picture. Several nearby men posed.

Jack thought they were home free until the guard insisted they go to the main building. Change of plan, but they'd deal by doing inside first then move outside. Going in through the service entrance, they were placed in a waiting area until the guard could contact someone named Fidel. *Damn*. Jack would give the situation three minutes then they'd go rogue.

Lauren wanted to stand in the middle of the floor and scream to the world on live TV that the SOB smiling so benevolently and doting on his chimpanzee was a horrendous, mass-murdering terrorist who'd kidnapped her children.

Instead she bit her lip, clenched her jaw, and walked along with the *Latimoor Live* crew. She had to hand it to Candace, the woman was a master of maneuvering. Menendez/Miles had wanted to take everyone to the GXP plant that adjoined his private compound, but Candace had talked him into showing them his private quarters first, emphasizing just how much more human and real and empathetic the viewers would be if they got to know the real Andreas Miles before they learned about his ingenious biofuel invention, GXP.

Menendez had fluffed like a peacock and began leading them around, explaining all of the green technology built into his facilities. He rarely had to use a generator between solar, wind and hydraulic power.

He led them to his energy control panel room and the engineer in charge. The man began explaining how power for the entire compound was regulated. While they were being lectured to, Lauren saw a man approach Menendez. Menendez immediately left the room, looking alarmed.

Lauren hesitated only a split second before following. One of Latimoor's crewmen with a small video camera followed her.

"Want to tell me what's up?" the guy whispered. A partially opened door indicated the way Menendez and his man had gone.

"Just follow and film," she said. "And whatever you do don't let them hear us."

Once they passed through the door, Lauren heard Menendez. "This is an unacceptable failure, Fidel. How could they possibly escape?"

"You said the rooms would be a perfect prison. But they were not designed to be. The doors were locked, the windows barred but a design flaw was not seen."

"¿Que?"

"The hinges were on the inside."

Menendez screeched loudly, as did the chimp in his arms. A loud ruckus followed by a man's scream.

"George will finish this later."

Lauren moved forward with caution. The sight of a man choking on his own blood as he tried to deal with the fact that his nose had been torn off his face turned her stomach and sent her heart wrenching with fear for her sons. The cameraman caught it all and Lauren hurried after Menendez, hopeful that the man would lead her to her children.

Beck paced the waiting room, messing with the toys attached to the camera and Jack was ready to scream with frustration. Weston wasn't handling the idle wait well either.

"Damn different than our usual takedown." Jack clenched his fists.

"Yeah." Weston exhaled hard. "Makes one feel as effective as a wet noodle."

Their usual method of lethal infiltration was solid, second to second action. In the two-minutes and forty-five seconds they'd been sitting they could have secured an entire building.

"Got something," Beck said. "It's chaos on the Big Easy with the number of people talking, but 'race car' came through."

Jack and Weston jumped to their feet. It was all they needed to roll. They exited the room and moved at a fast pace down a hallway. Beck had hoped to zero in on the race car voice and lead them to it via volume read outs. The next transmission was "monkeys, Aunt Angie" but after those two phrases, Beck heard nothing else.

Damn. Jack led the way and they kept up the pretense of filming as they moved through the rooms.

"I've got chimps."

"Let's go with it."

Beck led them opposite the service entrance and down a hallway. They passed a door that had been set off its hinges and Jack's pulsed raced. All three of them picked up their pace.

The sound of monkeys grew louder. The hallway opened up to a huge atrium where a domed ceiling of glass showed massively tall trees overhead and what seemed like hundreds of monkeys going wild, swinging from limb to limb, scrambling here and there.

Before Jack could step completely into the room, he was hit from the side by a chair. He managed to deflect it with an upper cut of his forearm as he slid out his p226 to shove in the oncoming man's face.

"Son of a bitch, Rico. That hurt." The man's features registered in a flash and Jack hugged the man instead of putting a bullet in him.

"Damn, DT. My aim is off. That should have nailed your head."

Weston and Beck entered and slapped Rico on his good arm. Rico groaned in pain.

"Where are the boys? Angie?"

"Here. Angie, you can come out. The cavalry has arrived."

Jack turned to find the blessed sight of Matt and Mitch and Angie. All three looked frightened out of their minds. "Hey, kids. You ready to make some bad guys disappear?"

The boys gave a subdued nod. Man they were really wrung out.

Somebody else was with them.

"Who are you?"

"Friend of Bill's," Angie said. "Conrad Gardner."

Jack fought to keep his face neutral, still his skin crawled. So did his gut. This was the sick puppy whose house almost became his grave. "How did you get here?"

"Kidnapped after I escaped my burning boat. Tried to fight the man on the shore but he shot me." Gardner indicated his shoulder.

"Let's go then." Jack moved toward the boys.

"Nobody's going anywhere! They must die for their father's betrayal." Menendez/Miles ran into the room from the opposite hallway, gun raised and aimed right at Matt and Mitch.

"No!" Jack died a thousand deaths as he leaped toward the boys. Everything went in complete slow motion. Gardner dove away from the kids. Angie threw herself against the boys. Four shots were fired and pain ripped up Jack's back and hip as he landed on top of Angie and the twins.

"No!" Lauren screamed as she saw Menendez/Miles point a gun at her sons. She died in every thundering heartbeat that slammed through her as she ran and hit Menendez full force from behind. She was too late. Menendez had already shot Jack. Bullet holes riddled his back and a well of bright red blood spilled onto the carpet. She barely registered that Weston and Beck had guns pointed her way but jerked wildly up on them when Menendez fell to the ground. One of their shots must have fired because the glass dome overhead cracked.

A wild screeching came at Lauren and she twisted to see Menendez's chimp coming at her. All she could see was the man with his nose missing, Lauren ran. She jumped over a coffee table that sat in a

grouping of furniture and managed to shove a chair between her and the animal when he caught hold of her wig. She pulled away, barely feeling the pins ripping at her roots.

“Get down!” Lauren heard Jack yell. Though it went against every logical thought to escape, Lauren dove for the ground, just waiting for the chimp to rip her scalp off. Inhuman hands grabbed her legs with super strength and pulled her back. She screamed.

Fighting for breath, Jack rolled off Angie and the crying boys onto his back. He saw Lauren dive for the floor. He barely registered that Rico was grappling with Menendez over a gun and that Weston and Beck were fighting three other guards hand-to-hand as he took aim at the chimp. The shot hit the chimp’s shoulder and rang through the room. The chimp screeched in animal pain and let go of Lauren. It ran wildly toward a glass wall and then pushed through a framed panel, a pet door of sorts. It ran into the forest.

Menendez went insane. He broke free of Rico and ran toward the glass wall. Rico took aim at him as did Jack. They shot in tandem, but Menendez dove to the side. The bullets shattered a large glass panel and Menendez rushed through it, flying glass and all.

A second later ten men in complete tactical gear stormed the room. Christ, Jack thought, his heart sinking in dread.

“Hold your fire, mates.”

Jack recognized Rashid McGuire’s Scottish twang and it hit him. He sat up and looked at Rashid, who was pulling off his gas mask.

“You planned this all along,” Jack said. “You didn’t have enough evidence against Menendez to prove he was Menendez or the man in the yellow hat to raid, but if we went after him and found Collins’s kids, who would take you to task for helping out?”

Rashid grinned. “I’ll thank you later. Meanwhile, you all are under arrest. Got some hunting to do, but I’ll see you stateside.” Rashid and several other men followed Menendez into the rainforest.

Jack located Lauren. She had Matt and Mitch in her arms with Angie attached. She looked up at him and he nodded. A thousand words of relief, gratefulness and love were voiced in her expression. He didn’t know what the fallout of everything would be but he did have something to say to the NCS SOO. The man was barreling his bald head through the room. Weston and Beck were being cuffed. Rico and Gardner were getting medical attention. Bullet wound to the hip and bruised ribs aching, Jack intercepted the man. Jack wasn’t in the mood to play nice. “You take those kids out of her sight for even a second and I’m after you.”

“Are you threatening a NCS official?”

“No, I’m making you a promise. She’s not involved in any of this, but she’s one hell of a smart woman and knew Collins on some level. If you play your hand right, she might be able to help you figure out the details and get you accolades as opposed to a demotion. So, remember, I’ll be watching.”

“How?” the man scoffed. “You’re under arrest.”

“My connection goes all the way to the White House, dickhead. You do her wrong and I guarantee you’ll regret it before you die. Doubt me? Just watch. Inside of twenty-four the three of us will walk and there won’t be a damn thing you can do.”

The man gaped like a fish and Jack turned away, thinking there had to be a better man for the job.

He surrendered to the medical treatment and the cuffs and prayed like hell Weston’s connection to the White House would prove Jack right. But then, the moment General Dekker got wind of their little venture, the White House might not be enough to save any of them.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Asheville, North Carolina

1800 hours, August 29th

Jack frowned at Bear Grylls on the TV wondering what was so great about the man's mug from the *Man Versus Wild* show to push Livy's button. One minute she was tapping her foot to go home then the second she saw Bear, she glued herself to the TV screen. Currently, Bear was giving a lesson in surviving in Central Africa's rainforest, and slumming with the monkeys. Jack didn't think Bear would be making friends with the chimps if he'd met Murderous George. But that thankfully wouldn't be happening. When Rashid McGuire found Menendez/Miles in the Peruvian rainforest after hunting for him all night, George was with him. The monkey had been attacked by a jaguar and hadn't survived. Menendez/Miles didn't even put up a fight, but had surrendered, requesting one thing—that George be buried in the jungle. He got his request.

The world was still reeling from Mendes/Miles and Bill Collins's actions. Further study into Bill Collins's records and email drafts revealed that Collins was in Lebanon to trade Ambassador James's and Prime Minister Shalev's daughters to Muhammad al Qassem for backing to manufacture the Biofuel. Jack supposed that was a step above killing them as Menendez/ Miles had ordered, but not much.

The White House had come through within an hour of the SOO putting him, Weston, Rico, and Beck under arrest. The SOO practically blew a gasket releasing them that quickly. Jack had smiled all the way to General Dekker's office, where he got the ass chewing of his life. He still stung from the dressing down, but in a good way. There'd been a look in the general's eye that said he wished he'd been there.

The rescue mission had been so different from Delta's usual assault into a hostile situation and Jack found himself thinking more and more about how non-lethal the takedown had played out. It had him wondering about starting a company that did what Lauren had needed. The right men to help at the right time. Men who were capable of lethal force if needed, but also men who could operate outside the military's constraints. He hadn't mentioned it to anyone yet. He, Rico, Pecos, and even Beck were still recovering from what went down in Lebanon. Rico and Pecos had surgeries coming up. Beck was planning to take some time off and Jack was pretty sure it had something to do with his guilt over Ambassador James's daughter. Shalev's daughter was still in a coma.

For now, Jack and his men would take things a day at a time and see how everything played out. Helping Lauren, rescuing Matt and Mitch, and stopping Menendez/Miles despite his injuries had taken away the desperation that had been eating at him.

“He is so cool.” Livy practically sighed and Jack’s frowned deepened. What was the big deal about Bear?

“He is cool and a lot of fun on and off the show,” Jack said, looking for a connection to Livy.

Livy turned to look at Jack, wide-eyed. “You know that guy? You really know him?”

“Spent a month with him in the Tibetan Alps.”

He and Livy had shared a stiff, tension-filled day going to the movies and eating lunch. He’d come back to his hotel room to pack his duffle bag before he dropped her off at her mom’s house. He’d been in Ashville four days waiting to see her. Customary for Jill, she’d neglected to tell him that Livy was at camp until after he arrived. Jack had spent the three days looking at the misty mountains and doing some much needed thinking and had decided on a few things. His career had consumed his life. That needed to change. He needed to take time for relationships and to see a horizon beyond being a Delta team leader. His first priority was Livy. He’d see her every week until they developed a relationship past mere tolerance.

Jack also knew he wanted Lauren. He couldn’t get her out of his mind nor out of his heart. Didn’t know where that want would take him or her, or even if it was a possibility considering his role in Bill Collins’s death, but he realized he hadn’t given it a chance. That look she’d given him at Andreas’s compound when she had her arms wrapped around Matt and Mitch, wasn’t anywhere near a look of disgust. Quite the opposite.

“Dad!” Livy reached out and punched his shoulder. “You can’t stop there. Tell me more!”

Jack turned his head in shock and Livy’s eyes widened even more than they had over Bear Grylls. She hadn’t called him Dad in years. Only Father, and she hadn’t voluntarily touched him in any way either. That she’d playfully punched him like she used to do when he hadn’t told her something she wanted, left them both emotionally open.

Jack tapped her back like he used to do. “You first, Liv. Tell me what’s so big about Bear and I’ll tell you anything I know about the guy.”

“Don’t you know that just about every hot guy at camp hero-worships him? All us girls were really looking sexy in our bikinis in the canoes and they didn’t pay us an ounce of attention. All they talked about was Bear Grylls that and Bear Grylls this. So us girls checked Bear out. And OMG is he uber hot and knows more than the boys at camp could ever dream of knowing. The girls will just die to find out you know him.” She frowned. “Can I tell them? It’s not secret, is it?”

Jack blinked. Hot guys? Sexy? Bikini? Uber Hot? Grylls? Livy was ten. Ten freaking years old. He sucked in air, trying to breathe, but not quite sure he was. “Yeah.” His throat was thick with emotion. “You can tell them.”

Livy squealed and then turned her attention back to Grylls and sighed.

What the hell? Jack thought. It was a damn good thing he'd woken up now. Another year or two and there would be no telling what trouble Livy would be into. He didn't think seeing her once a week was going to be enough.

His cell buzzed and he answered Weston's call.

"They cut her loose," Weston said.

"What do you mean?"

"Let her go. Told her to call them if she thinks of anything else and sent her home. Dean just called me. No protective services. Nothing. The International Crisis Summit is next week. The proof from Menendez's compound and the arrest of his operatives before they attacked UAE's holdings will go a long way to soothing some. But there are radicals that are going to be calling for more blood. As Collins's widow, she and her sons could be targeted. They still haven't pieced together all of the puzzles yet, and who else may be involved. There is also five million still hanging out there."

"They're setting her up. What do you bet the SOBs are putting her out there as bait?"

"I agree. Listen, some idiots are making anonymous bomb threats to Bragg this afternoon and the place is locked down. Mari went with Holly to the supply store, but their cell phone is jammed. All circuits busy. Otherwise, I'd catch a plane to Atlanta."

"She's going there?"

"That's what Dean says. Says one of Bill's friends installed a top of the line security system for her."

"Gardner?" Jack asked, his skin crawling. The man couldn't rub two nickels to— Shit? Was it possible? Jack ran Gardner's dump back through his mind. The equipment on the porch splattered with water. The puddle of water on the porch. The shooter hiding in the rafters as if he knew someone would come? Was he being paranoid? Prejudiced because the guy was such a loser? Or was Gardner not an innocent victim in this mess?

"Don't worry. I'll be there in three," he told Weston. "How is Mari?"

Weston gave an exasperated huff. "Physically she's healed from her cuts and the doctor says all is well with the baby. Emotionally, she's not so good. She's withdrawn, won't talk, and keeps looking over her shoulder as if there's a bullet with her name on it. I'm hoping that once the police catch Dugar she'll relax."

"Damn. Keep me posted. I'll call after I reach Lauren's." Jack disconnected to see Livy watching him carefully. He wasn't necessarily cutting their time short. She was due back to her mother's house in twenty minutes, but they had just made somewhat of a connection, the first one probably since the divorce and he didn't want to lose that. He wasn't above bribery to keep that connection going until he could get back to see Livy. "I've got something important to do, but since you and your friends are into Bear and he has a

new survival book coming out soon. How about I take you and your friends to buy his book and get it signed?”

Livy jumped up. “Really?”

“Really.” Jack shook his head and figured someday he’d have to tell Bear that *Man Versus Wild* had saved him and his daughter.

Atlanta, Georgia

Lauren didn’t think that she or the boys would be spending the night in their house, but they all needed to collect some of their belongings before she headed for the coast. She’d rented a house in Wilmington, North Carolina for a few weeks. Public school had already started in the Atlanta area, but she wasn’t going to go that route. Some of what Bill had done was still unknown and unresolved. The GXP formula had been found on tiny data chips inside the race cars. Menendez was in custody, being held in maximum security without bond for terrorist acts. Publicly Bill’s name never appeared in any of the news reports and all documents involved in the investigation were top secret with the NCS. But there were still a number of unknowns about the case. Who else might have been involved and millions of dollars out there somewhere.

In one way her life wasn’t ruined, in others it was. She couldn’t rest. She couldn’t sleep. She couldn’t seem to function. Private school and a new life were going to be her first steps to one day have at least one easy moment. But that was a long day in coming.

Repairs to the house had been done and a top-of-the-line new security system had been installed, compliments of Conrad Gardner. He’d sent her an email and she’d thanked him for it. She felt bad in taking it for free, considering his economic state, but had yet to figure out a way to send him money. She hadn’t mentioned his trailer and he didn’t ask her what she’d done after finding out his boat had blown up. That was odd, but then maybe he didn’t want to know if she’d gone to his place or not.

Delusions and denial went hand in hand with any illness.

It was strange to walk into the front door of her house, though everything that had been broken was now new, and everything that had been displaced was now orderly, but her home was not the same for her or for the boys. They walked in subdued and clinging to her hands. Only Sasha and Sam bounded happily inside and barked with enthusiasm. Lauren had been surprised when the NCS had brought the dogs to the safe house. It had really helped Matt and Mitch, whose nightmares were keeping everyone awake.

The boys still had their race cars, minus the formula Bill had hidden inside.

A couple of hours and they’d be on their way. She hadn’t just arbitrarily chosen Wilmington. It was coastal, but it was also less than two hours from Fayetteville. Less than two hours from Jack. Less than two hours from the man she couldn’t seem to put from her mind no matter what role he’d played in Bill’s death,

nor how he'd played his hand with her. He'd made a mistake or two, and she had too. She wasn't willing to leave things the way they were either. Another few days to gather her bearings and she would either call him or get really daring and head to Fort Bragg for a surprise visit as Angie suggested. Angie talked to Rico every day and had flown to Fayetteville to see him in the three weeks since they'd left Peru.

But Lauren hadn't heard from Jack once. Then again she'd been stuffed in a safe house that even she hadn't know the location of. Still, she was talking about Jack. He could have reached her if he had wanted. She shoved the thought away and turned to the task at hand.

"Let's put together everything we need for the beach in the living room and then pack the car."

"Are those men coming with us?" Mitch asked.

"No. They're not. We don't need them anymore, okay?"

Matt smiled. "Didn't like them always there. They aren't like Mr. Jack. Mr. Jack was fun."

Lauren blinked. She hadn't even realized the boys remembered Jack. "Yes, he was."

"Will we see him, Mom?" Mitch asked.

"I hope so." Lauren moved farther into the house. "I really hope so."

Fair Play, South Carolina

"Oh, hell no!" Gardner yelled at the video feed of Lauren entering her house. He'd been glued to the damn camera ever since he installed the system two weeks ago. He pushed aside the dirty dishes and drink boxes and levered up from the chair his ass was literally stuck in.

He hadn't expected that they weren't going to stay when they got home. Damn, he had to get there fast. He grabbed the computer he'd been watching via a nationwide satellite card so he'd know how close she was to leaving before he got there. He could always call her and delay her somehow.

He already had everything set up, hidden in her house, ready. He even had bones in the dog dishes that would drug the beasts. He may have lost the millions but Lauren was worth hundreds of thousands and it was his.

Rushing to his car, Conrad put the metal to the floor, determined to get his hand on Lauren. It was damn shame she was leaving the house. He would have enjoyed watching her naked in the bathroom or sleeping in her bed. He wanted to catch her pleasuring herself. She had to get it one way or another, didn't she? And with the kids in tow, not many guys would go for it.

Damn, it was just like the bitch to mess up his plans.

Lauren let the dogs outside. She had just about everything she could think of in the living room and began packing the car. It had taken her longer than she planned. She carried another load out. Matt and

Mitch were still running up and down the stairs, bringing down a favored toy or book. She'd delegated a basket for each of them. Once that basket was full then they were out of room for toys for now.

She heard the phone ring as she walked in the door, but it didn't ring again and she grabbed another load.

Dusk had dropped a damper on the bright day and an urgency to hurry up and leave pressed upon her. Cars passed as neighbors returned from work or dinner or carting their kids to extracurricular activities.

Two more loads and she realized that she hadn't seen Matt or Mitch putting more toys in their basket. What were they up to now?

"Matt? Mitch? Come on. You guys need to hurry with your stuff. I'm almost packed."

She picked up another basket but then set it down when they didn't answer. She called them again as she moved up the stairs. "Come on, guys. No fooling around. It's getting late."

She turned the corner into their bedroom and screamed in horror, her body strangling with shock. Both boys were tied to their beds, tape over their mouths and tears streaming from their eyes. She moved toward them then saw a bomb on the bedside table they shared and froze.

"No fooling around, Lauren? What a disappointment. I'd love to." Conrad Gardner appeared out of the boys' closet.

He held up a remote. "And guess what? I'm the one who gets to decide what we do and for how long we do it." He grinned. "I'm wanting to go to your bedroom. Now."

She could hardly hear him through the pounding blood in her ears. She had to get that remote out of his hands and she would do anything to get it. She slowly backed from the boys' room and back to her room, not willing to take her eyes off Gardner. He followed her smiling.

"Let me see your tits. I want to see you play with them. Get them hard for me. Or the wee ones go boom."

Oh God.

Think.

One thing she knew was Gardner loved himself.

She reached for her shirt buttons. "It was you," she whispered, pausing after the first button. "It was you who killed Thomas."

Conrad shrugged. "It was an accident. He wouldn't let me have Bill's letter to see the clue. I'm the one person who needed the five million dollars and Thomas was going to take his letter to the police."

"You killed Edward."

"He deserved it."

"You faked your own death."

"Ingenious. The perfect crime."

"It was you who shot Jack at your house."

“Not so perfect shot. And you shot me, bitch. Now let me have your tits.” He grabbed her shirt and ripped the buttons open.

Lauren backed away as he stared at her lace bra. *Think. Think.* “Five million. You mean there were clues to five million dollars? The government only found the two Bill left me in the bank.”

Conrad frowned and shifted his gaze from her breasts to her face.

“What were the clues?” Lauren asked, praying he would remember them, that she’d diverted him from rape for now.

“There once was a king. He died on a throne. In his land of Grace, did the whole world mourn. Buried like a bone, by the water’s spray. He reigns supreme until this day. The jackpot lies as does he, but the real prize will be...” That’s where Ray’s letter ended,” Conrad said.

Lauren swallowed hard and her very soul shook. Ray and his girlfriend had been butchered. Bob’s wife shot. Lauren knew how it all ended. *“the real prize will be won when green world burns and Earnhardt, Jr’s win the race with the super formula in their tanks.”* She’d never forget those words or forgive the danger Bill had put her and her sons in. Dear God.

“I have to write this down,” she told Conrad. She moved over to her desk, quietly slid her stiletto letter opener into her pocket as she took out paper and a pen.

Conrad came and looked over her shoulder. His greedy gaze fanatically watched her write every word.

Anyone who knew Bill knew he’d been an avid Elvis collector. She really didn’t have to write any of it down, but she had to buy time. King? Throne? Land of Grace. Graceland. And buried like a bone. That had been Bill’s comment about how Elvis had been buried in his own backyard. He’d said it wasn’t classy. The man needed a memorial. And by the water’s spray? There’s no way Bill buried his money in Graceland. But what about the fountain in the backyard here? If she could get Conrad outside and digging, he’d set down the remote.

“Kings?” She looked up at Gardner. “We don’t have any real kings in America like they do in Europe. But I don’t think Bill would bury money over there and it clearly says it is buried like a bone. We’ve got the King of Pop. That was Michael Jackson. Is there a King of Jazz?”

Gardner’s eyes widened and he grabbed the paper. “King...King...King of Rock and Roll. The King. Elvis. Bill often checked out the Elvis impersonators in Vegas. This is talking about Elvis. The Jackpot lies as does he. In Memphis? Do you think Bill buried the money in Memphis? In Graceland?”

“Maybe.” Lauren prayed she’d be able to buy more time. It was a six hour drive to Memphis. “But maybe it’s here by the fountain out back. We can look there first. He might have more clues to where the money is there.”

“Smart.” Conrad leered at her. “But I’m not stupid enough to take you out back to see.” He grabbed her and clamped handcuffs on her right wrist before she could jerk away. Then he snatched her up from her desk chair and dragged her over to the bed, clearly planning to cuff her to it.

She pulled against him, the metal cuffs cutting into her right wrist. “But you might need my help.”

He held up the remote. “Go boom,” he said then grabbed the front of her bra and yanked down hard. Her breasts popped free and a knife of dread sliced her to the bone as Conrad reached for a breast with the remote in his hand. His clammy fingers touched her and she shivered with revulsion.

“You like that don’t you,” he said.

She arched her back as she clutched the letter opener with her left hand. Jabbing upward, she knocked the remote out of his hand and impaled his wrist with the letter opener. Blood spurted as if she hit a vein.

“You and your brats will die, bitch,” Conrad released his hold on her right wrist and yelled, diving for the remote that had landed on the bed.

“NO!” she screamed, clawing after him. God. Fate. Couldn’t do this. Why hadn’t the remote landed on the floor or under the bed, somewhere hard to reach?

He stretched out his long arm and jabbed for the button. With so much wresting, she didn’t know if he’d hit it or not. Her heart stopped when he looked at her and smiled. But then he frowned when nothing happened and her heart thundered with hope.

He stretched for the button again.

“Hey, Gardner.”

Lauren whipped around at the sound of Jack’s deadly voice. Gardner reared up.

“Good-bye.” Jack planted two bullets in the middle of Conrad’s forehead as the bastard dove for the remote again.

“Matt! Mitch!” Lauren ran forward.

Jack caught her around the waist and pulled her into the hallway where she could see that the boys’ beds were empty. “Are at your neighbor’s house, safe and the dogs are with them, lightly drugged but okay. Police and bomb squad are on the way and so is a vet. The bomb is in the fountain.”

“Thank God. Oh, thank God. How did you know?”

“Long story.” He nodded to a computer lying at the top of the stairs. “His car was on the street with that computer showing live feed of your bedroom. I heard it all. Carrying the bomb to the fountain was a piece of cake compared to hearing him threaten you.” He shuddered as he pulled her into his arms. “We have to stop meeting like this. My heart can’t take it.” He buried his face against her neck.

“There is only one way to fix it,” she said, her heart racing again with fear, fear that he wouldn’t feel the same way she did. But life was too short and she was going to lay it all on the line. He either wanted her or he didn’t. She leaned back to look him in the eye.

“How’s that?” He quirked a deadly brow.

Handcuff dangling, she placed her palm over his heart and searched his eyes. "To never part."

"Sounds perfect." He didn't blink, he didn't hesitate; he just gave her a wide sexy smile.

She wasn't done yet. He had to know that she took him for what he was, the whole package. "There's something you need to know, DT. I'm very glad you're an ace at headshots."

"Me too," he said, looking her in the eye and breathing a sigh of relief. "Dear God. Me too, Lauren."

"Teach me to shoot like that? I'm never going to be caught vulnerable again."

Jack laughed. "You? Vulnerable?" He shook his head. "You do damn good, but yeah. I'll teach you everything I know inside and outside of the bedroom and the battlefield."

"That sounds like it will take a long time."

"Plan on it."

"I am."

"There's five million buried by the fountain." Lauren sank against him and he kissed her gently as if she were a breakable china doll.

"I've got all I want right here."

"Me too. I know a few charities that could use it."

"And I know a man who can make that happen without the government getting their Jockey's in a wad."

"Good."

He touched the cuffs and gave her a wicked smile. "Care to take me prisoner?"

She latched her arms around his neck, using the cuffs to make him captive. "Only if you kiss me like there is no tomorrow."

He did, but tomorrow still came.

0630 August 30th

"It's tomorrow!" Matt yelled. Lauren cracked an eye open.

"It's tomorrow! Mitch yelled. Lauren groaned and shut her eye.

"It's tomorrow." Jack slid a cup of steamy coffee beneath her nose. "And guess what that means?"

Lauren squinted at Jack. He appeared as if he'd already shaved and dressed. They were back at the Inn with adjoining rooms.

"The beach. The beach. The beach. The beach!" The boys jumped up and down on the other bed.

Lauren bit her tongue and let them have a minute of forbidden fun. They'd been through so much.

"The beach." Jack agreed with the boys. Then he bent down and whispered in her ear. "And I get to kiss you like there is no tomorrow all over again, but this time I'm going to kiss you *all over*."

Lauren squirmed under the blankets already feeling him everywhere.

Damn, Jack thought as he stood and walked across the room to alleviate the painful tightness in his jeans. Having little ones around was going to keep him on the painful edge of hungry all the time and he couldn't wait. Bring it on, he thought. There were times when delayed gratification gave tremendous rewards and Lauren was the best prize of all. He smiled at the boys' enthusiasm.

They reminded him of Livy this morning. He'd called her and arranged for her to meet them at the beach for the Labor Day weekend. Now all he had to do was email Bear Grylls and see if he could drop in *before* his next assignment. The survivalist was stateside, slotted to do a *Man Versus Wild* special in the swamp. The man was insane to take on gator-infested waters.

In one way or another Jack realized that everyone experienced collateral damage from the fallout of life. What determined the result was all in how a person viewed themselves and conquered the obstacles. He hadn't done a very good job of it before Lauren. That had changed and was going to keep changing. Yeah, he was shorter of breath. Yeah, he was one day closer to death. But life was full. Life was good. And that was all that mattered.

About the Author

J.L. Saint is the pseudonym for USA Today Bestselling Author Jennifer St. Giles. She is a nurse and mother of three. She has won a number of awards for writing excellence including, two National Reader's Choice Awards, two time Maggie Award Winner, Daphne du Maurier Award winner, Romance Writers' of America's Golden Heart Award, along with RT Book Club's Reviewer's Choice Award for Best Gothic/Mystery. Website: jenniferstgiles.com jlsaint.com Books: *The Mistress of Trevelyan* 8/04, *His Dark Desires* 11/05, *Touch A Dark Wolf* 9/06, *The Lure of the Wolf* 7/07, *Kiss of Darkness* 4/09, *Bride of the Wolf* 5/09. *Point of No Return: Mammoth Book of Vampire Romances Book 2* 9/09. *Collateral Damage* 12/10, *Midnight Secrets* re-release 4/11, *Darkest Dreams* re-release 8/11, *Silken Shadows* re-release 12/11.

Author's Note: This book is a work of fiction and I apologize for any factual errors. This story is not meant to be a negative reflection upon any of the organizations, religions, or institutions depicted in the novel. The world is not perfect. The world is not black and white. No one side is completely right or completely wrong and never will be. What we must guard against is the world becoming so polarized that rational thought becomes impossible and people become blinded by their individual realities to the point that they lose sight of the precious humanity that unites us all, a dangerous precipice upon which evil flourishes. At its heart this book is about heroes in the world that choose good over evil and fight for freedom for everyone.

I want to thank my editor, Tera, for her unfailing patience, Samhain Publishing for taking a chance on this story, and to thank everyone who made writing this book possible during a very difficult time. My appreciation to Greg Leiker for setting a few facts straight and helping me get the plot ball rolling and to Diane Perkins for our Lady Jane's Salon discussion in New York. Normally, I would insert a long and beloved list of family, friends, and forever writing buds here—but you know who you are. Your unfailing support and love means everything to me.

Loving him could be an adventure that gets her killed.

Defy the World Tomatoes

© 2010 Phoebe Conn

Darcy MacLeod's Army brat childhood drives her to sink roots as deep as the plants with which she works. As part owner of a nursery/gift shop in Monarch Bay, she's well on her way to her dream. Though she's haunted by the lingering fear that her one chance for true love has come and gone.

When Griffin Moore asks her to landscape his sumptuous new estate, she's entranced by the internationally renowned pianist's air of mystery. Yet as she is inexorably drawn into his bed, her instincts tell her that secrets lurk behind his sophisticated mask.

With her carelessly styled hair, grubby overalls, and hands that see more dirt than an earthworm, Griffin finds Darcy a refreshing ray of light in his shadowy world. His globe-trotting concert schedule makes him the perfect Interpol informant—and makes a permanent relationship too dangerous to risk.

Their passion rivals the music of the great classical masters, but even as Darcy dips a toe into Griffin's extravagant world, darkness reaches out to strike a dangerous chord. And Darcy must fight to keep her second chance at love—and her lover—alive.

Warning: Contains meddling friends, high adventure, down and dirty sex, and a couple who make beautiful music together—in bed and out.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Defy the World Tomatoes:

Griffin waited for Darcy in his driveway. "I don't mean to shock you, but unlike most men, I actually enjoy reading directions. Let's go on out to the terrace. I'll read the notes with the diagrams, and you can assemble the kite. It's shaped like a dragon with a long, notched tail. It's very colorful. I hope you like it."

"It's your kite," Darcy reminded him, but when he pulled it out of the package, she couldn't help but be impressed. "Start reading, I want to see this thing in the air."

"First we have to unroll it."

"All right, I'll hold the tip of the tail while you walk backwards, and that ought to do it."

"Hey, I thought I was giving the directions here."

"Sorry. I'll keep my mouth shut," Darcy promised.

"Well, not all the time, I hope." Griffin soon had the dragon stretched out across the terrace. He checked the directions again and sorted through the accompanying dowels. "These go in the head and wings. Do you see the slots that hold them?"

"Slots?" The dragon was red and breathing orange flames. Darcy felt along the sides. "They've got to be here somewhere. This is your kite, after all. Why don't I read the directions while you attach the dowels?"

“Don’t complicate things. Just get busy.”

Darcy raised a hand. “Let me see that diagram.”

Griffin stepped beyond her reach and hid it behind his back. “Come and get it.”

“No way. You’re the one who wants to build the kite, remember?”

“An excellent point.” Giving in, Griffin knelt beside her. “Maybe they didn’t sew this one together correctly at the factory.”

He was mere inches away and studying the kite’s construction rather than tormenting her. His lashes made shadows on his cheeks, and he was quite appealing when he was in a playful mood, but none of it seemed real to her. It was all just a trick, and he probably wouldn’t stop until he’d convinced her that she actually wanted to move Defy the World clear out of town.

Then she grew curious. “Why do you need a recording studio if you’ve stopped rehearsing?”

“Later. Here we are, the slots open on the other side. Hand me the first dowel.”

Darcy slapped it into his hand. “Tell me.”

“Let’s get the kite in the air first.” Griffin slid in the dowels, then attached the string. He stood and shook out the kite, then looked up at the cloudless sky.

“Is there some trick to getting this thing in the air?” he asked.

“You’ve never flown a kite?” Darcy stood and moved out of his way.

“I began playing the piano at five and just looked up a couple of months ago. There’s a whole lot I’ve missed, including the art of kite flying.”

Darcy didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but she imagined he must have been a very serious little boy indeed. “You need to run while you let out the string, and the wind will carry it aloft for you.”

Griffin looked around to judge the distance. “If I stay on the terrace, I shouldn’t be in any danger of falling off the bluff.”

“Go for it,” Darcy encouraged. She watched him cross the terrace in an easy lope and when he turned back into the breeze, the kite bounced upward. “That’s it, just let out the string.”

Griffin fumbled with the reel, then caught it and laughed when the kite rose steadily into the air. The wind whipped the dragon’s long tail and serrated wings, pushing it higher. “Wow, it looks like a real dragon, doesn’t it?” he shouted.

“It sure does. Now just move back a little and keep letting out more string.” She raised her hand to shade her eyes, then walked across the terrace to where she could observe Griffin as well as the brightly colored kite.

She remembered the kids who had played in the high school band as being rather nerdy. Not that she’d been Miss Popularity, but at least she hadn’t always had her nose in a book. With Griffin’s looks, no one would have ever called him a nerd, but it saddened her to think he must have missed out on a lot of the fun of growing up.

“Is this all there is to it?” he asked.

“Not really. The wind can shift and send a kite right into the ground, or into a tree. The power lines are buried underground up here, but usually they pose a threat too. Then, if there are others flying kites, your string can become tangled in theirs and send both kites plunging to earth.

“Depending on the wind conditions, flying a kite can be frustrating, or like today, just plain fun. Let it go up as high as you’d like, but remember you’ll have to rewind all the string when you bring it down.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Why don’t you come here and try it?”

Here we go, Darcy thought, but the prospect of having him wrapped around her wasn’t all that unappealing. She moved to his side and gradually took control of the string. To her infinite dismay, however, he stepped back out of her way.

“Now, tell me why you need a studio,” she prompted, as much to distract herself as to discover his intentions.

Griffin moved up behind her and began to rub her shoulders. “You look rather stiff. Does this feel good?”

His touch was light but sure and incredibly soothing. “Christy Joy said you’d have great hands.”

“Did she?” Griffin chuckled.

Darcy hadn’t meant to pay the compliment out loud. “Please don’t tell her I said that.”

“I’m going to be tempted, but maybe we can work out something.”

“Do you expect a bribe?” Darcy felt a strong tug on the string and released a bit more. The kite was way out over the bluff now and dancing against the sun.

Griffin leaned down and nibbled her right ear. “Stay for dinner. I bought a roasted chicken. You eat those, don’t you?”

Darcy felt his breath on her cheek and couldn’t recall his question. “Chicken?” she mumbled numbly.

Griffin kissed her left ear lightly. “Yes, do you like them?”

He was wrapped around her now, and as snugly as she had imagined—no, hoped. She relaxed against him, and he began to trace teasing circles around the tip of her left breast with his right hand, while his left crept slowly down her stomach toward the sweet spot between her legs. His hips were pressed against her back, and there was no mistaking the intensity of his desire.

“This is what you had in mind all along, isn’t it?” she nearly moaned.

“Do you blame me?”

Darcy dipped her head. She supposed this was simply his usual routine. He would be in town for a few days to give a concert, and if he wanted to connect with a woman, he would waste no time in going about it. Even better than a sailor with a girl in every port, she bet he had women all around the world eagerly awaiting his return.

“Darcy? What was his name?”

Startled, Darcy turned to look up at him. "Whose name?"

"The man who broke your heart."

Enfolded in his embrace, Darcy could not recall any of the other men she'd known. "Griffin Moore," she breathed out softly.



SAMHAIN[™]
P U B L I S H I N G