

# “Great Sacrifice”

By Kenya Gaede

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## **Dedication**

To those of you, young, old, and in all walks of life, who were created with the unquenchable passion to write. Trust me, it's not something you can ignore, so you might as well as embrace it. But an important question to ask yourself is: are you going to use your gift to build up or tear down?

## Preface

As of December 2012, the original “The Great Sacrifice” was almost six years old. This was my first published book and although I had been writing stories for years, I was still developing as an author. Now a few years have passed and, as I have continued to write, I have matured (I hope).

It’s like an artist taking up a new medium. The first pieces of work are rough, but as one continues to practice, the technique sharpens and hones.

As I began rereading this book, it was quite apparent after the first two chapters I was going to do a rewrite. Aside from the new title, chapter titles have been added. Pretty much everything has changed. It's like a new story. Certain key points or events are the same, but you come to them in a completely different way. Relationship dynamics are different, key characters have been given more depth, and you actually get to "see" why the antagonists are such nasty characters. Things flow much more smoothly, and just as quick, if not quicker, than initial text, and things make more sense. It's not like you'll be rereading massive sections of text if you bought the original book. Even the ending has changed, so...don't get too attached to anyone!

To those of you who are reading this for the very first time...cheers!

I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed rewriting it.

## Chapter 1

### Eventful Day

“TJ! Let’s get moving!” he called as he stormed down the narrow hall, old floorboards squeaking beneath his shoes. He shoved open the partially closed door to see the witness rolling off the bed and to his feet.

Special Agent Jason Stayton, six foot four with broad shoulders and strong arms that made him look like a football player, grabbed the witness by the coat collar and pulled him towards the door.

“Come on,” he growled, expression furrowed with concentration.

The witness, a middle-aged man, thin and going bald, stumbled into the hallway. Using the wall, he managed to keep himself from tripping.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered hoarsely, eyes shifty.

TJ had a right to be nervous. He worked for a multi-billion dollar corporation that had become one of the largest financing companies in the United States. All was going well. That is, until he stumbled upon some information directly linking his boss and other CEO’s to weapons dealings with the mob.

Being the upstanding citizen he was, TJ snooped around to gather more information and then gave it to the FBI. He didn’t go to the local cops because they wouldn’t offer much protection, if any at all. At least, that’s what he learned from watching crime dramas on television.

The case turned TJ into the prosecution’s key witness—especially after his co-workers began turning up dead.

Now the FBI was keeping him under their watchful care and refused to entrust his wellbeing to anyone else. Thus, enter Jason Stayton, TJ, and the safe house they were presently leaving.

Jason pushed the man down the hall, through the pantry, and out the back door that opened into the woods.

“I think our location’s been compromised,” he said, finally answering TJ’s question.

He poked his head out the door and scanned the area, his sharp blue eyes quickly taking in the birch and spruce trees. A cool breeze from the north brushed through the branches, shifting shadows, and jostling the tall grass.

Jason surmised that he didn’t like this situation at all. As he pulled TJ through the door, he could feel his stomach tightening with each passing second, and when the hair on the back of his neck rose, he was positive they were being hunted.

They lifted into a jog, running lightly over the last few patches of snow, the grass swishing against their legs. After finding a game trail, they picked up the pace, cutting through the trees and aware of how eerily quiet the forest had become.

“Where...are we going?” panted TJ, who obviously didn’t frequent the gym.

Jason, gaze continuously sweeping their surroundings, flinched as TJ blurted the question while he gasped for oxygen.

“To meet reinforcements,” he huffed out quietly. “Now hush.”

*Snap!* A branch behind them broke. Jason instinctively grabbed TJ by the back of the neck and bent him forward. The first gunshot cracked through the trees even as he drew his firearm.

“Pick up the pace,” whispered Jason, throwing a look over his shoulder, but saw no one.

Both men sprinted along the trail as it drifted left, near a thick stand of trees. At the next gunshot, Jason shoved TJ off the trail and crashing through the willows.

Two more gunshots, closer this time. A chunk of bark hit Jason in the shoulder as a bullet made its mark. Glancing back, he caught a glimpse of someone in a gray coat duck behind a large spruce.

“Keep running,” he said to TJ, “and stay low.”

TJ wove through the trees, trying to keep as many as possible between himself and his assailants. He sure hoped his bodyguard agent was as good as the Bureau said he was.

When he spotted a shadow beside a thick stand of birch, he slid to a stop and frantically searching for a place to hide. Spotting a large fallen tree, TJ dove behind it as another gunshot punched through the quiet air.

Suddenly it sounded like he was in the middle of a battlefield. Multiple gunshots came from what seemed like everywhere and from maybe three or four different firearms.

Bark was sent flying from the tree TJ was hiding behind. Covering his head, he tried to search for a different hideout.

“Run!” he heard Jason yell. “Run now!”

TJ hesitated. He really didn’t want to do this. Could he actually trust the agent to protect him?

Taking a breath, he forced himself up anyway and bolted for a trail that disappeared behind thick trees, twenty meters ahead.

Bullets missed him by inches. Halfway to his refuge, TJ’s shoe caught on a tree root hidden by the moss, and he pitched forward.

Someone unleashed a snarl of pain somewhere behind TJ as he scrambled back to his feet. He hoped that hadn’t been Jason.

A barrage of gunfire rained down upon him. TJ was no weapons expert, but the sharp bursts told him at least one person had a carbine, semi-automatic rifle.

TJ threw himself behind a stand of spruce and crawled along behind them.

Seconds later the gunshots stopped, just like that. Dead silence settled over the forest. TJ did his best to quiet his breathing as he peered through the branches.

That was when someone grabbed the back of his coat and dragged him from under the tree. Flailing, he twisted around and looked at the man before him. It definitely wasn't Jason.

Adrenaline slammed into TJ's veins and his eyes went wide with surprise. This was it. He was going to die.

The man in a gray jacket had already leveled his gun at TJ's head and put his finger on the trigger...

One more gunshot rang out. A body lay still on the moss, blood soaking into the ground from the fatal, and gruesome, head wound.

Jason Stayton crept around a thick spruce, gun aimed at the assailant. He found a wide-eyed TJ half-sitting, looking at the man on the ground.

Jason holstered his firearm and pulled TJ to his feet. "Come on. We need to keep moving."

With a little encouragement, mainly a firm hand on his shoulder, a shocked TJ started down the trail.

Several miles later they would rendezvous with Stayton's backup unit, who would take TJ to safety. Jason could only imagine the paperwork he'd have to fill out after this little adventure.

Rubbing his face with his hands, he sighed.

Indeed, it had turned out to be quite an eventful day.

## Chapter 2

### Whirlwind

“Don’t touch me.”

“Would you just—”

“No!”

Cassidy Jackson, five foot four and all of one hundred and ten pounds of lean muscle, was known throughout the four divisions as being a real live-wire. Her intense blue eyes snapped at everyone and she had a “let’s just get to it and catch some bad guys” mentality.

And no one intimidated her. It didn’t matter if she was dealing with a terrorist or a gangbanger with two hundred pounds and a foot of height on her. Cassidy didn’t let anyone walk over her, and she told anyone what was on her mind at the time.

“Listen, Cass, could you—”

“Quit it!”

She tore her arm away from the agent trying to calm her and nearly elbowed him in the face. Her jaw was set tight and her gaze hard. She had a right to be upset—she’d just returned from a disastrous overseas assignment.

The main doors of the large room opened and in strode a rather large man. He was at least three days unshaven, with marked tiredness about him. But his intelligent gaze was steady and clear.

Cassidy watched how the other agents responded to his entrance, doing a quick study of how their expressions and body language changed. This man was admired and respected, perhaps however, in the same way someone might respect a wolf.

*Of course, when you’re that tall...* thought Cassidy, folding her arms as he stopped between her and the other agent.

“There a problem?” he asked with a voice that commanded attention. He stood towering over her, and Cassidy stepped to the side to get out from his shadow.

The other agent was about to answer, but Cassidy beat him to it. “I came to see Chief Braxton, but he isn’t here. And then Tony,” she jerked her thumb at the agent, “kept patronizing me.”

“That’s because you came in like a madwoman!”

Cassidy’s volume had already been elevated. Now it kicked up another notch.

“I did not!” she snapped. “Why don’t you just back off!”

The tall man looked down and studied this young woman before him. Her long dark brown hair was haphazardly pulled back in a ponytail, away from those fiery eyes. Her fair complexion was marked with cuts and scrapes like she’d been involved in some kind of altercation recently. The plain white, long-sleeved shirt was too big and flopped

past her wrists even though the cuffs were rolled back. The brown leather coat was faded and also rather worn, like her jeans, and her shoes were covered with dust.

He noted a touch of red in her eyes as she set her jaw, mouth drawn in a tight line. She appeared ready to throttle someone.

“I’m Special Agent Jason Stayton,” he said finally, extending his hand.

Cassidy slapped her hand into his. She had quite the grip. “Cassidy Jackson.”

His eyebrows rose. “So you’re the infamous Jackson...”

Nearly everyone had at least heard of her. CIA trained, spoke a bunch of languages, knew the layout of Middle-Eastern countries better than America. Her dad had been military or something rather, and she had tagged along with him, unofficially of course. She hadn’t even finished college when she’d been given jobs offers from various government intelligence agencies.

No one was sure exactly what happened next because she disappeared for a while, rumored to have joined up with an experimental branch of intelligence. But when she did show back up, Cassidy Jackson had been involved in a number of classified assignments.

Somehow she ended up here. Local gossip said it was some kind of disciplinary action for going rogue one too many times and not playing well with others.

“She’s here about her latest assignment,” jumped in Tony, holding faxes that had come in regarding the mission.

Cassidy snatched them from him.

“Sheesh, Jackson, you’re so...”

“I just lost half my team!” she bellowed.

Silence filled the office. The few people in the room decided to slink away to less hostile territory.

Jason’s expression furrowed. “The east Africa op?”

Cassidy took a deep breath and let it out, exasperated. “Yes.”

Some of her fight had disappeared, replaced with sullenness. She rubbed the side of her face, trying to decide whether or not she should divulge any information at the moment.

For over a decade, the FBI had been increasing its global presence. Normally the average person thought of mob bosses or fraudulent million-dollar firms when they heard the acronym “FBI.” In this present day and age, however, things had changed and the Bureau’s reach was expanding.

Finally, Cassidy said, “We were supposed to meet with a special ops team, but they never showed. We’d come so far already and...”

Cassidy gave a shake of her head and pressed a fist against her forehead.



“It was up to my discretion whether or not to continue,” she continued, looking at Jason, anger flashing in her eyes. “So we did...and I got half my unit killed. We were ambushed shortly after arriving at the target location.”

Her expression changed to a cool glare as she looked from Jason to Tony. “But that means they knew we were coming and that someone obviously gave them that information...”

Cassidy let her sentence trail off. In the whirlwind of minutes Jason had known her, he guessed she was probably thinking of various things she would do to the traitor once she found him.

“Well,” said Tony, looking at his watch. “I need to get going. Uh...I am sorry about your team, Cassidy.”

Jason rolled the chair from behind his desk and offered it to Cassidy. She rested her hand on top of it but didn’t make a move to sit, her mind someplace else.

“You’re in the west division just outside the city, right?” asked Jason, borrowing a chair from an unoccupied desk and sitting down.

His question brought Cassidy back to the present. Taking his lead, she sat and skimmed the papers she’d taken from Tony. “Yeah, west division.”

“Yours was the best unit of the four branches in the state.”

“Was being the keyword,” corrected Cassidy bitterly.

“Does your boss agree with your theory of a mole,” asked Jason, “someone who leaked your movements to the enemy?”

She tossed the papers onto a desk and leaned back in the chair. “Not if they got the same fax I just read. Nothing conclusive right now. But if someone on the inside was involved and is in on the investigation...”

“They may have access to reports and be able to alter them before they reach anyone high up the chain,” finished Jason.

He raised an eyebrow before asking, “And Hensley sent you all the way over here to talk to the chief...he didn’t want to lose any face over the possibility of getting into an argument?”

That made Cassidy bust up laughing. “The *likelihood* of an argument, you mean,” she answered. “The rumor that Hensley and Braxton despise each other isn’t just a rumor. Hensley loathes the higher-ups who placed Braxton as chief over the four divisions instead of him.”

She leveled her gaze on him with eyes twinkling. “Hensley is usually an alright boss, but sometimes he acts like a real—”

Jason’s cell phone rang. Digging it out of his pocket, he glanced at the caller id and then answered. “Stayton.”

There was a brief pause before Jason's expression became puzzled. "That's what they're calling it?"

He shifted uncomfortably, feeling Cassidy's eyes reading him like an open book. "Yes, sir."

He ended the call and sat in silence for a second to process the information he'd received. "Bob Dexton was just found dead."

It was Cassidy's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Bob Dexton? As in, the Dexton who was my unit's direct contact in DC, who oversaw overseas logistics?"

"That's the one. The chief said it looked like Grant slipped on the stairs in his house, fell and cracked his skull on an end table."

"Right," said Cassidy, "days after an overseas operation ended up killing three agents..."

"You don't think it's a coincidence?"

Cassidy huffed through her nose. "No such thing."

With great effort, she pushed herself out of the chair, stiff and sore from nearly being blown up in another part of the world.

"Well, it was nice meeting you," she said, rummaging in her pockets for her keys. "I'm sure we'll run into each other again."

"Headed home for the night?" asked Jason, who was thinking about grabbing a bite and a late movie.

He usually had a few days off between assignments, which allowed him to disengage and recover. He'd actually only come in today to look over and submit reports from his previous case. Then he'd bumped into Tony and Cassidy.

*This is what I get for coming in on my days off,* he thought to himself.

Cassidy looked at Jason like he'd just suggested she go dress shopping. "No. I'm going to the crime scene."

"Wait, why?" he asked. "We have people for that. What do you think you'll find anyway?"

Cassidy faced him. "I'm not looking for evidence. I just want to see the scene itself. With everything that's happened in the past few days, I wouldn't trust what I read in the final ME report."

"You think someone would intentionally botch it?" asked Jason. He tried to inquire with a straight face, but couldn't entirely keep the 'you might be just a little paranoid' look from his expression.

"I don't have to explain myself to you," she answered coolly before turning and starting for the door.

"Hold on a sec," said Jason, springing to his feet.

He really had no idea what he was doing as he stopped beside her. The “protect” switch of his brain had just been flipped on and he hadn’t even realized it. It wasn’t uncommon with his assignments, and it usually took a few days to totally detach after a case closed.

“You don’t think you’re a bit close to all this?” he asked.

The second the words left his mouth Jason knew he’d said the wrong thing. Cassidy’s face hardened and a warning flickered in her eyes. He may have been a head taller than her and had a hundred pounds of muscle on her, but in that instant, he was rather afraid of her.

“If you think I’m going to sit idly by and twiddle my thumbs while those responsible for killing my people and my unit’s logistics officer are still out there somewhere,” she said evenly, “then you are sorely mistaken, Special Agent Stayton.”

She stepped closer, “And one day, when you have the deaths of your agents on your head, I’d love to see how you react.”

Jason cleared his throat and shifted his weight back. He didn’t need to be a special agent to decipher Cassidy’s body language. She was engaged, wound tight and telling him if he said one more wrong thing, physical violence would follow.

*Why do I care what she does anyway,* he thought to himself. He had no idea. But he did know he suddenly didn’t feel like going home right now. Besides, there was something irritatingly interesting about her.

“Okay, we’ll stop in for a quick look,” he said.

“We?” asked Cassidy, eyebrows lifting before she continued her thought, *and I could have been halfway to the crime scene already if you hadn’t initiated this whole pointless conversation.*

“Look, Dexton was a liaison for my division too,” began Jason, scrambling to come up with a believable explanation, “not just yours. I’d also place money on a bet we’re going to land your team’s case, especially since Hensley sent you over here. If Dexton’s death really does look like murder, I don’t want that to be overlooked, because that would give confirmation to your theory it’s related to the Africa op.”

Cassidy gave him a look that said she didn’t believe him. Jason didn’t blame her. He’d just totally b.s.’d his way through that whole speech, like he used to do on English essays in college. But, then again, he didn’t have to explain himself to her either.

“You are not a member of my team,” she replied, “and you are not my partner, so don’t feel like you have to tag along...I’m sure you can read all about Dexton’s death in the final report when it comes out.”

Cassidy ended the conversation for them by turning and heading out the door.

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose, thoroughly exasperated. His options were: go home and sit in an empty house or make a trip to a crime scene with a woman who couldn't stand him.

It was actually a tougher call than one would think.

With a sigh, he pulled out his keys and walked out the door after her.



It was dark by the time they got to the residence of Bob Dexon. There was no way Cassidy and Jason were riding in the same vehicle, so they'd come separately.

There were only two sets of flashing lights outside the house. For the death of a government official things seemed pretty docile. They probably wanted to keep it out of the press as long as possible.

Jason brought his dark green sedan to a stop behind Cassidy's sleek black coupe.

She joined Jason's side and they casually walked up the driveway. It rose gently a short distance to where the house sat atop a small rise. It was a modest two-story with a three car garage. Looked quite homey.

The two agents approached a shorter, muscular man with short reddish-brown hair and his hands on his hips.

"Chief Braxton."

"Hey, Jason, good to see you back in one piece," replied the chief with a gruff voice.

Jason nodded to Cassidy. "And this is Special Agent..."

"Cassidy Jackson," finished Braxton. "Yes, I was briefed on you and your unit in light of recent events. Oh! I have some documents for you, from one of your Agency friends. Something about an unfinished case..."

Jason glanced at Cassidy, who just scowled. She didn't like people knowing her business.

"Hey, what are you doing here anyway?" Braxton asked Cassidy.

"Since Dexon was important to the west division, we just wanted to take a look at the scene," answered Jason.

Cassidy's lips drew into a tight line and her eyes flashed with anger, clearly unhappy he had spoken for her.

"Alright, well, everything's been mostly processed already, so sign in, take a quick walk-through, then I want you to get out of here," replied Braxton. "That goes especially for you, Jackson. You need to go home and crash."

Cassidy's own leadership approach may have had all the tact of a bulldozer, but she respected authority. She'd never argue with a superior in front of fellow coworkers.

So she managed a "yes, sir" through a clenched jaw and then brushed past Jason.

Inside, the scene of Grant's death appeared straightforward. It looked like he'd slipped from the top step of the wooden stairs and then smacked his head on the end table at the bottom.

"Looks like an accident to me," shrugged Jason as the ME and his assistant prepared to move the body.

There were forensic scientists and crime scene investigators walking around the house, double-checking to make sure they didn't miss anything. Of course, there hadn't been much to gather anyway.

Cassidy said nothing as she inquisitively studied the living room, to the right of the stairs, and the kitchen, on the left. Her expression was one of intense concentration and as she mulled about, and Jason wondered what was going on in that spy brain of hers.

At last, she stopped at the base of the stairs, glanced at the body, then knelt down to inspect his shoes. Afterwards, she stalked silently to the top of the steps where she observed the floor.

"Long scuff marks," mused Cassidy, mostly to herself. "So...he just felt like dragging himself to the top of the staircase, standing up, and then throwing himself down the steps?"

They moseyed through the upstairs and found everything in its place. It was unclear where he'd been leading up to his death, and Cassidy wondered what exactly he'd been doing before his untimely meeting with an end table.

"So you get assigned to quite a few bodyguard jobs?" asked Cassidy, poking her head into the master bedroom.

*Well, this is a bit off topic,* thought Jason. "Uh, yeah. It's more like bodyguard and transport."

"From what I've heard and read, you excel at it," she said, turning down the hallway.

Jason eyed her as she stopped abruptly and checked out the bathroom. "What you've read? You read up on all the agents?"

Cassidy paused to look over her shoulder. Choosing her answer carefully, she responded with, "One thing I learned quickly while overseas was to know the people you work with. Some traitors are the ones you'd least expect."

*So someone has trust issues,* thought Jason as she continued down the hall, *but then again, who doesn't?*

After another five minutes, Cassidy had completed her expedition and satisfied her need to study the scene. Stopping in the open entryway, she skimmed over the notes she'd taken on a small pad she kept in her pocket. With a sigh, she flipped the pad closed and rubbed her forehead, which was aching terribly.

“I may not be your partner,” said Jason, a bit smartly, “but I hope you’ll take care of yourself and go home and get some rest now.”

*Rest, thought Cassidy, almost laughing, right. If you only knew...*

She opened her mouth, ready with a comeback when Chief Braxton marched through the front door.

“Jackson!” he exclaimed. “You’re still here?”

“We were just leaving, boss,” answered Jason again, earning him another icy look from Cassidy.

“Good.”

Braxton looked at Cassidy. “Hensley would tell you to take the week off, talk to someone and all that, however, we know you won’t listen. But I don’t want to hear you’ve gone into work tomorrow, or I’ll make sure Hensley puts you behind a desk for the rest of your secret-agent, terrorist-fighting days.”

Cassidy knew it was an empty threat, but caught the gist of it. Not that it would keep her from going back to work in the morning.

She and Jason left the house and walked down the driveway. Cassidy ran a hand over her face and let out a long breath.

“You need me to drive you home?” asked Jason, trace of concern in his voice.

“No.”

The response came out a bit harsher than Cassidy intended, but she was feeling quite tired and exceptionally crabby.

They stopped between their vehicles, officers and forensic associates mulling about and totally oblivious to them.

“Look, I know it doesn’t mean much, but I really am sorry about your team, Ca...uh, Agent Jackson,” said Jason gently, which was difficult to do with such a commanding voice.

Cassidy merely nodded, gazing out at the darkness of the trees across the road.

“I trust we’ll be seeing each other again,” he continued, studying her intently.

Her mind was someplace far away again, gaze distant as she managed a, “yeah.”

In the lights along the driveway, he could see just how worn she really was. There was marked stress in the lines on her face as she glared out into the dark. Jason couldn’t help but feel a little empathetic for her, but there was also a spark of admiration. She appeared small and fragile, yet she somehow stubbornly stood up beneath an incredible weight.

“You take care of yourself,” said Jason, a cautious tone in his voice.

The expression with which she fixed upon him would stay with him for a long time. It was a haunting gaze, hollow. Then rage flared to life, and finally pain.

And as quickly as it came, it was gone, hidden behind exhaustion. If Cassidy truly was as he perceived her, and if she was like him, she'd never talk about her feelings.

Cassidy said nothing more to Jason and gave a nod before heading for her car. Jason thought about helping her because of the stiff way she was moving, right arm pressed against her side. Then he decided against it. He'd already earned enough bad points with her.

After Cassidy drove off, Jason sat in his car a moment, clutching the steering wheel. He cleared his throat, reached for the key in the ignition, but stopped and closed his eyes.

It would be one more night of going home to an empty house. He'd been debating on whether or not to sell it, yet he couldn't bring himself to actually do it. Not yet. Even if he bought another house, he knew he'd still be going home to an empty place.

The memories, the wounds, were still so fresh, even after two years. But it all seemed like yesterday. A semi-truck driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and his rig smashed into his wife Jenny's car, sending it through the guardrail and into the dry riverbed. Miraculously, his wife survived with minor injuries. But their four-year-old daughter, Abby, didn't. Dead on impact, that's what he'd been told. As if that would bring any comfort or bring his daughter back.

Jason cleared his throat again and turned the key, bringing the car to life.

He had once believed in God, starting in college when he'd been "born again." Jenny had been a believer since middle school, and their daughter loved it when they'd read the family Bible every night.

But Abby's death had tested him. Jenny somehow pressed through it, seemed stronger. She'd been a saint to help Jason continue living and their relationship, though rough at times, had ultimately strengthened.

However, when a fast-moving cancer took Jenny on the anniversary of the car accident that killed Abby, it also took Jason's faith.

Death had taken his family, so for the past two years he'd thrown himself in its path. But it didn't seem interested in him.

Working obsessively seemed to be the only way to numb the pain, and he wasn't stupid enough to get into alcoholism or drugs. Instead, he allowed himself to grow calloused, to ignore the Lord's gentle nudging, asking him to come back.

Jason's tactic had been working well...until he met Cassidy Jackson in person. Sure, he'd heard the stories about her as an agent, but he'd never met her.

He didn't know a short encounter could so quickly reopen such deep wounds. Cassidy's fiery spirit and the power she possessed in a small body reminded him so much of Jenny. His wife was eerily similar, and little Abby had long been showing signs of taking after the personality of her mother, even at age four.

Jason set his jaw against the ache that grabbed his heart. Normally a good dose of anger would dull the pain, but he was just too tired.

*This is cruel and unusual*, he thought to the heavens.

Then with a sigh, he put the car in gear and headed down the road, resigning himself to the fact it was going to be a long night.



## Chapter 3

### **Rogue Partners**

The morning was gray and wet, as if the weather was aware of the dreary mood.

When Jason walked into work, he went straight to the conference room at the back. Chief Braxton and Tony were already there, seated at a long oak table. It really was a nice piece of craftsmanship. Too bad it was out of place with the rest of the cheap furniture in the building.

Jason took a chair opposite Tony as the two other agents came in and sat. They looked as tired as Jason, like none of them had gotten any sleep. Everyone except Tony, of course. He was the 'new kid' and hadn't experienced burnout yet, so he was always pumped and ready go to.

Braxton, at the head of the table, leaned back in the chair and toyed with a pen. "Okay, here's the rundown. Since the other two divisions are bogged down in current cases, my bosses have decided the killing of Jackson's team in Africa is our top priority."

"I take it our friends in intelligence were kind enough to provide us with some preliminary findings?" guessed Tony.

"At first glance, there isn't much to go on," replied Braxton. "Just looks like a rebel group got the jump on them. Plenty of shell casings, damage done by RPG's..."

As the chief continued on, Jason glanced around the table. Beside Tony was Logan, mid-forties, blue-gray eyes with gray hair beginning to show through his natural brown. He was a good agent, sharp mind, but getting a bit stiff-necked in his old age.

Next to Logan sat Lee. It was said he was from Asia, but he looked more Native American, at least to Jason. His facial features were distinctive, high cheekbones, long, narrow nose. His short hair was jet black, eyes dark chocolate brown. Lee was more reserved and didn't speak until he was good and ready.

Finally, there was Kara, strawberry blonde, hazel-blue eyes. But don't be fooled. She was as battle-hardened as any commander. From a pitiful family life growing up to tragedy that marked her young adult years, she was anything but a push-over. She had a quiet fierceness about her, a determination that Jason only wished he had.

"So, like I said, we have this case," Braxton was saying. "We may be able to get a little help from the other divisions, but don't hold your breath."

"Any leads?" asked Logan.

Braxton shook his head. "It's a very turbulent part of Africa. None of the local terrorist groups stand out, and they certainly would have taken responsibility for killing Americans..."

“But what about the fact the attackers knew Jackson’s team was coming?” asked Jason. “Or that they knew exactly where and when to hit them? Doesn’t that clearly point to a traitor, someone who leaked the information? Whoever did could easily have paid a rebel group to execute the attack.”

Braxton grimaced as he reluctantly admitted, “That is a very distinct possibility, which means we’re going to have to take extra precautions to keep things under wraps.”

“A mole hunt during a case where we’re trying to find someone off the radar,” muttered Logan.

“Great,” mumbled Kara before taking a sip of coffee. “There goes the next ten months of my life...”

“Why don’t we just round our top wanted guys?” asked Logan sarcastically. “I mean, they’re upstanding citizens, I’m sure they’d know something.”

Jason’s blue eyes flicked from Logan to Braxton.

The chief raised a hand. “We might be a mobile unit, but we’re still FBI. Our cases have to hold up in court, so we have to be careful about violating Constitutional rights.” He sent a sly look at Jason, “Unless, of course, our perpetrators aren’t American citizens and are hiding somewhere overseas.”

“I know there would probably be a whole ‘conflict of interest’,” said Logan jokingly and apparently feeling his oats this morning, “but why not just put Jackson on the trail? She has plenty of skills and connections. I’m sure she’d have this case wrapped up in forty-eight hours.”

“Yeah, then she’d disappear after leaving a trail of bodies for us to clean up,” added Tony.

That earned him a curt look from Jason.

“Alright, alright,” said the chief, cutting in and leveling a correcting look at Tony. “She’s one of us, people.”

The door to the conference room opened and in walked a new tech Jason hadn't seen before. He must have been hired after his last visit a month ago.

He walked quickly to Braxton, whispered a flurry of words, and then promptly left.

Braxton picked up the phone at the end of the table, the only thing decorating it, and punched a button. “Chief Braxton.” Pause. After a couple seconds his jaw twitched. “When?” he asked, checking his watch. Another pause. “Thanks.”

Braxton dropped the phone back into its holder with a sigh. “Another one of Jackson’s team was found dead not an hour ago. Looks like he was out for a jog and had a heart attack.”

“Who was it?” asked Kara.

“Marty Sharp, thirty-two and in picture-perfect health.”

Logan shrugged. “Sometimes that happens to young, healthy people.”

Jason's right eyebrow arched as he thought, *Yeah, and you'd have to drop at least thirty pounds just to be near the range of 'healthy.'*

"Yea, a young healthy guy who was also part of Cassidy's team in Africa," jabbed Kara.

She and Logan shared a hard look.

Jason smiled inwardly at the exchange.

"So here's what we're going to do first," said Braxton, clapping his hands together. "We're going to pick up the rest of Jackson's team and keep an eye on them until we figure this out."

He leaned forward, "Remember, this isn't just some group of agents, the west division was elite trained, like, uh, special ops. They are very good, but...they can't be on alert twenty-four seven."

He looked at Jason. "You already know Jackson. Go pick her up."

The chief stood. "While you're all doing that, I'll get some leads rolling."

They all got to their feet and went on their way. As Jason made for the stairs, he searched through his cell to find Cassidy's number.

On one hand, he was glad he hadn't seen her today. But right now he wished she'd ignored the boss's orders and come in anyway. It would have saved him a trip through town.



*Rapid weapons fire came from everywhere in the darkness, drowned out intermittently by an RPG. She smelled the dust, heard the distinct rap of the AK-47, the shouts from her team as they ran for cover, and tried to pinpoint the location of the enemy unseen in the night.*

*She couldn't clearly see what was happening because she was surrounded by semi-darkness. Then came a flash and a deafening bang that rocked the night. She felt the shockwave from the blast punch through her.*

*Shielding her eyes from the brightness of the burning debris, which had once been a villa, she saw three silhouettes standing in front of the flames. She didn't need to step closer because her eyes adjusted and she saw who they were.*

*Morgan, Bryant and Stevens, the three agents who'd died in the ambush stood looking grimly at her. A deep ache grabbed her heart. Their fatal wounds were displayed in gruesome detail and would always be engraved in her mind.*

*The last thing she saw was their expressions before everything faded. There wasn't any anger on their faces...just disappointment.*

*"Excellent job," said a snide voice. "Walked right into an ambush and got three team members massacred. Nicely done."*

*“Your father should have trained you a little better,” said another voice, this one closer.*

*In the semi-darkness, she spotted one of the shadows, winged and looking at her with black eyes that reflected a glint of light.*

*“Ah come on,” joined in a third, off her right shoulder. “It’s just history repeating itself. You complete your mission no matter the cost. Even in a group, you still operate by yourself, leaving the others to struggle to keep up with you...”*

*She couldn’t help but wince at that jab.*

*“You can take care of yourself,” added a fourth shadow, circling around from the left. “But it’s the others who pay the price.”*

*Others might have been terrified to actually see demons in their dreams. But being a believer, she believed wholeheartedly in the daily activities of angels and demons. One could not be in this line of work, see some of the things she had and not believe in evil.*

*Besides, these four had been hounding her for years. Sometimes they were too cowardly to actually show themselves, and only felt obliged to visit her with nightmares. Other times, when they were feeling particularly mischievous, they’d pop up to do some harassing face to face, like now.*

*Feeling her anger rising, Cassidy looked at the ugly imp to her right. With a yelp, he fluttered back to a safe distance.*

*If it had actually worked, she would have meleed the brute on her left with the rifle still in her hands. But physical weapons weren’t what one used against this enemy.*

*A sharp pain stabbed through her head. Slapping a hand on her temple, she leveled a glare at the demon in front of her. Heart beginning to pound, she marched towards him. “Get out of my head,” she snarled, pointing at him.*

*Her vision blurred with darkness. Seconds later she felt something strike her in the chest once, then again, and again.*

*When her vision cleared, she found herself standing by a crumbling wall on the side of an abandoned structure. She was back with what was left of their team, on the edge of the small town. And she was taking rounds to the vest.*

*She half-collapsed behind the wall, oxygen pushed from her lungs. Panting, she glanced twenty feet away, to the far side of the building where Stevens was laying down cover fire.*

*The rest of the unit made it across the open and she forced herself up to her knees. Rifle in hand, she peeked over the wall. She spotted a pair of muzzle flashes atop the steep rise and squeezed off a couple rounds.*

*Stevens signaled to her, letting her know everyone was clear and he was ready to move.*

*That was when, in the light of a nearby fire, she saw it.*

*“Stevens! NO!”*

*Rapid fire pinned her down. She pulled out a grenade and threw it at the foot of the hill, just something to create a brief distraction.*

*She rose into a crouch when the rocket hit Stevens’ location. She didn’t know if it was multiple rockets or what, but there came a jarring bang, followed simultaneously by a blinding flash. She slammed into a pile of debris, landing on her side on a piece of rebar...*

Cassidy awoke with a fierce snarl. It took her a full thirty seconds to realize she was in her apartment, sitting on the floor beside her bed. Her breathing calmed slightly and she became aware of how badly her side ached. Hands shaking, she lifted the side of her shirt to check the injury.

It had been a miracle, and the armor, that kept her from getting a punctured lung or organ. Her side was black, various shades of purple, and presently throbbing. She must have elbowed herself in her sleep or something.

She rubbed her face and discovered tears on her cheeks. *Easy*, she told herself as she took a few steady breaths, *you’ve seen worse*.

She pushed herself up onto the bed and noticed the lamp and alarm clock. Sometime during the night, both were sent crashing off the nightstand. Batteries for the clock were nowhere to be seen, probably hiding under the bed.

When her phone, the only item still on the nightstand, buzzed at her, Cassidy literally lurched to her feet.

“Pull yourself together, woman,” she muttered to herself. She snatched up the phone and punched a button.

“What?”

There was a brief moment of silence before, *“This is Jason. Everything...okay?”*

“Just peachy,” answered Cassidy, tossing the blankets and sheets back onto the bed.

*“I was a bit surprised you didn’t come in this morning.”*

“Alarm clock malfunction,” she said, turning for the kitchen just on the other side of the hallway. “What can I do for you?”

In passing, her foot slammed the edge of the doorframe, making her toes crack. “Ow,” she growled, “son of...”

Muttering, she hobbled over to the counter.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that,” said Jason.

“Nothing. You were saying?”

*“There have been some new developments. My division landed your case, and the chief is already working more leads. Are any of your Agency contacts able to provide any information?”*

Cassidy grabbed one of the two mugs from the cupboard. It slipped from her fingers and after some fumbling she managed to drop it onto the counter.

"I haven't exactly had time to ask around," she replied, turning to the little island where the coffeemaker sat.

She punched the "on" button.

Nothing happened. She frowned.

"Plus you know how government agencies are big into interoperability," she continued sarcastically as she punched the button a second time. "Sharing critical information would just be too helpful and courteous."

Drawing a frustrated breath, she slammed her fist down on top of the machine. Of course, it never fixed anything, but it made her feel better.

*"Ain't that the truth...well, I'm on my way to pick you up."*

"I can drive myself just fine."

*"The chief asked me to pick you up,"* stated Jason, *"and the rest of the team is picking up the remaining people in your unit."*

Resigning herself to the fact she'd have to walk across the road to the dump of a gas station to get coffee, she headed out of the kitchen. She cut around the island a little too close though and slammed her hip into the corner. She'd done it a number of times before, but her bruised side didn't appreciate it.

Grunting, she bent over. "Gosh...dang it!"

*"Are you sure everything is okay?"*

"Yes!" she exclaimed, voice dripping with derision. "Everything's just fine!"

Cassidy stomped down the hall for the door. "Something happened that made the chief particularly concerned for our safety. What is it?"

In the background of the conversation, she heard screeching tires, followed by a blaring horn.

*"Uh...I'll explain on the way back to headquarters."*

Cassidy slipped into her running shoes, aware she was still in her flannel pants and oversized shirt. But she really didn't care at the moment.

"Be that way," she said. "You need directions to get here..."

After relaying them to Jason, she hung up and grabbed her coat off the hook. She still had ten minutes before he arrived, plenty of time to go ingest toxic amounts of caffeine, which she was going to need to function today.

Cassidy undid the chain, then the deadbolt and finally the lock on the doorknob. She gave the door a yank. It didn't budge. She tried again with the same result. The third time she threw her shoulder into it, but that didn't work either.

Head back, she growled with frustration, fists clenched. Taking a breath, she kicked the stupid door, which occasionally didn't let her out of her apartment without a fight.

Cassidy pulled out her phone to call the landlord and sighed. "Man, I hate Wednesdays."



After Cassidy gave him directions, Jason closed the phone and cut across three lanes of traffic upon seeing a sign for the exit he needed. Ten minutes later, Jason pulled onto a gravel parking lot in front of an ancient looking apartment building.

Seconds after he stopped, Cassidy appeared out of the shadows and climbed into the passenger's seat. She looked a little better than yesterday evening, like she may have gotten a few hours of sleep.

"The building looks a little, well...it looks like you need to get paid more," Jason commented as they pulled onto the street.

Cassidy snorted a laugh. "Agents such as myself need to be inconspicuous, so I don't mind."

She glanced at Jason as he sped through a yellow light and took the on-ramp that launched them onto the freeway. "So, what's all this about?"

Jason was silent a couple seconds and could feel Cassidy's gaze trying to read his thoughts. He cleared his throat and kept his gaze on the traffic ahead. "Another one of your teammates was found dead this morning."

Silence.

Jason shot a few quick looks at Cassidy. She just sat there, expression stoic as she gazed out the windshield. He knew she was processing things, fitting this new development into her musings.

He didn't know exactly who all she had worked for, or what all the CIA, FBI and whoever else had asked her to do. But he knew she understood loss of lives, including those on your team, came with the territory.

"Who?" she finally asked.

"Marty Sharp."

Out the corner of Jason's eye, he saw her wince a little like she'd received a physical blow.

"You, uh, knew him well?" he asked after a beat.

"Not really. I'd only been this unit's commander a few months. You know how it goes out in the field; it's all business, no personal stuff."

Silence.

Jason shifted a little after a few minutes. "May I ask you something?"

Cassidy shrugged. "Shoot."

"Do you prefer to work alone?"

Cassidy gave a nod. "I was only transferred to Hensley's unit for a specific case they were working overseas."

Jason looped under the overpass, then came up and across the freeway before back down, heading the other direction. "I figured as much," he said, "you seem to be quite the nomad."

A small smile tugged at Cassidy's mouth. "I take you to be quite the rogue yourself, what with the types of tasks you get assigned."

It was Jason's turn to manage a weak smile, the first of any sort since she'd met him. "I prefer solitary over group work," he replied.

When he noticed Cassidy still looking at him, or more appropriately, studying him, he fidgeted a little. The expression she wore told him she knew more about him than he realized.

"Yeah, solitary's for the best," she sighed quietly, returning her attention forward as she muttered, "especially when history repeatedly shows if you work in a group the people around you usually wind up dead."

Jason shot a look at her, but before he could inquire his phone rang. He fidgeted, attempting to grab it from his back pocket while trying to stay on the road at the same time.

Finally, he had it.

"Stayton." When he heard the news from the person at the other end of the line he couldn't hide his expression of incredulity.

"When was this?"

Pause.

"Thanks, bye."

"Who's dead now?" asked Cassidy blandly.

"Greg Bennett."

Cassidy considered this. "They're working up the chain of command...with whoever's left that is."

A breath of silence passed.

Jason jumped when Cassidy suddenly slammed the side of her fist against the door. Anger hardened her gaze as she glared out the windshield, jaw muscles flexing as she clenched her teeth.

She wracked her brain, trying to think who would know her real identity and the identities of her team. Who would have that kind of reach, have access to those resources? Was it someone she had personally crossed?



She was reluctant to admit this was about her because one, she was raised to believe the world didn't revolve around her. Second, there wasn't even a trace of evidence that said this was someone with a personal vendetta.

After a few minutes, Cassidy drew a breath to calm herself. Glancing at the side mirror, she said offhandedly, "You know that silver sedan has been following us since we left the apartment complex."

Jason's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. Sure enough, a silver car was two cars back and one lane to the right.

He casually changed lanes to pass a slower vehicle.

The other car mimicked their maneuver, then settled two vehicles behind again.

Jason saw Cassidy fiddling with her cell phone on her lap. Up ahead, traffic was thinning, meaning they would soon be more vulnerable.

Cassidy finished doing whatever it was with the phone and shot a look in the side mirror.

"Down!" she yelled as she and Jason hunkered forward as a bullet went through the back window.

Jason swerved into another lane amid blaring car horns. They flew along the left shoulder as Jason held the accelerator to the floor.

Cassidy, still stooped, pulled her gun out from under her jacket and checked the magazine.

Jason sent the car swerving in front of a huge semi, cutting back to the right out of the pursuers' line of sight. Moments later, the silver car reappeared in the rearview mirror and two more bullets finished off the back window, shattering it.

"Take the next exit!" shouted Cassidy, peeking out the back window.

Jason did as told and sent the sedan screeching down the off-ramp, just clipping a car that was moving too slow and unable to get out of the way quickly enough.

The silver car didn't do much better. It fishtailed, slammed into a black SUV before correcting and rocketing forward.

"Take a left at the second light!" called Cassidy over the noise of the air rushing through the back window.

"Why?" asked Jason.

"We're going to get my car!"

The only vehicle between them and their pursuers turned right down another street. As soon as the civilian car was out of the way, Cassidy opened fire, three rounds punching through the windshield and making the driver swerve.

They ran a red at the second light and did a power slide under the freeway...sort of. The sedan whined loudly, protesting to the abuse.

"Why are we getting your car?"

“You honestly think we can outrun whoever it is in this thing?” answered Cassidy with a question.

Bullets plinked into the trunk.

“Besides,” she added, “I don’t think yours will *last* all the way back to headquarters.”

More gunshots.

“Take a right up here.”

Jason floored the gas and shot around the corner. “Why are we out here instead of heading back to the apartment?” he asked, passing a red car as they flew down the road.

“You think I’d leave my car out in the open? I don’t want to start my car one day and find a surprise waiting for me.”

There was another gunshot, followed this time by a loud pop. The back end of Jason’s car broke loose. One of their tires had been shot out.

“We’re almost there,” said Cassidy, crawling into the backseat. “Take the next left, but don’t do it until I say.”

The silver car was coming up on them fast.

“Uh, Cassidy?”

“Not yet.”

The silver car got a little closer.

“Cassidy...”

“Wait.”

They were within a few feet.

“Cassidy!”

“Now!”

Just as Jason began turning the wheel, Cassidy sat up and opened rapid fire on the silver car. Bullets made the windshield spider web and crack.

But their followers were undeterred and moved to cut them off.

As Jason’s car swung around, Cassidy braced herself against the side and shot out a rear passenger window. She turned her focus on the front of the car, aiming for the radiator. Smoke erupted from it seconds later, and with one last round, Cassidy nailed the driver. The silver car veered suddenly and wound up in the ditch.

“Whoo!” exclaimed Cassidy, climbing back into the passenger’s seat. “Reminds me of my last trip to Algeria!”

Jason just blinked at her. This was the first time he’d seen her stoked like this. Then again, it was the first time he’d seen her in action. She was in her element, and he quickly surmised she was one of those people who truly felt alive in the midst of dangerous conflict.

Another quarter mile later, Jason's now rather beat up car finally clunked to a stop in front of an abandoned house.

Jason killed the engine and joined Cassidy outside. He followed her as she jogged behind the house where, hiding under a large tarp, was what she called her "black beast."

"A Pontiac," nodded Jason appreciatively.

"Yeah," said Cassidy, unlocking it and dropping behind the wheel as Jason got in on the passenger's side. "Pity they don't make 'em anymore."

When the engine rumbled to life, he cocked an eyebrow. "I thought the GTP only had a V6?"

Cassidy smiled coyly. "I may have had a little work done on it."

She put the car in gear and sent it roaring forward. They swung wide on the gravel road, and up ahead she saw the silver car still in the ditch.

Cassidy rolled down her window, drew her gun, and shot out the left front and rear tires. Satisfied, she punched the gas and they continued their way.

Feeling Jason's stare, she said, "It's been a bad day."

On the freeway, they hadn't gotten half a mile before a blue car merged out of the light traffic and moved in behind them.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Cassidy. "Really?"

She watched the passenger pulled out a gun. Veering hard to the left, they dodged around an SUV and met the blue car on the other side. They drove beside one another a couple seconds, Cassidy sending the driver an 'I'm not amused' look.

She swerved towards them with a jerk. The driver of the other vehicle had just enough time to veer out of the way. After correcting, he glared at Cassidy and Jason and swerved towards them.

Cassidy was already accelerating and they shot ahead. The blue car missed them by inches and smashed into an Escalade. Tires screeched and smoke filled the air as cars rear-ended each other.

With that gesture, Cassidy hit the gas and sent her car flying down the freeway, the wreck behind them shrinking quickly.

Jason finally relinquished the death grip he had on the seat and armrest of the door. Letting out a breath, he glanced at the speedometer. It read 110mph. He never would have guessed with the way the engine purred along happily.

He looked at Cassidy, stoic expression again in place, like it was just another day in the life. In a span of twenty minutes she'd gone from quiet and pensive, to Marine on the battlefield, and then back to calm.

*Women, he thought, are so complicated.*



It turned out that Cassidy was the only one of her team to reach division headquarters. Everyone else was missing.

There was minor discussion about the pileup on the freeway, but Jason and Cassidy assured Chief Braxton it could not have been avoided.

Then when Cassidy found out she'd been brought in to be placed under protective custody, she nearly hit the roof.

"Protective custody!" she exclaimed. "You cannot be serious."

*What a little firecracker she is,* thought Jason, standing to the side at a safe distance. Although, he was actually quickly becoming used to it.

"Not in the traditional sense," replied Braxton calmly. "We just want to keep an eye on you and the rest of your team."

Cassidy took a sharp breath and restarted by reasoning, "My team and I are highly trained."

"And yet they're still being picked off," countered Braxton. "Whoever it is, is good. They know you, your team, knew where you'd be in Africa, and know where you are now."

Cassidy's mood was darkening by the second, but she managed to keep her tone civil. "Sir, I can find out who's behind this. Just let me do my thing, work my connections, go on the hunt. Quick and clean, I'll take care of it."

"Might be a good idea, boss," said Tony, who was one of those people who had no common sense to keep his nose out of other people's conversations.

Jason could sense a bad moon arising as he watched Cassidy's cool gaze slide over to the agent. The same warning that flickered in her eyes yesterday returned, only this time directed at the rookie.

He cleared his throat, "Uh, Tony, I don't think now—"

"I'm just saying," continued Tony, stacking some papers together on his desk. "Look at what happens whenever she's assigned to a team..."

Cassidy's face darkened and she locked her gaze on Tony like she would a terrorist. Jason took a step forward, raising his hands a little. "Why don't we continue this—"

"Sure she can look after herself..."

*Oh, Tony, just shut up,* thought Jason.

"...but can she protect the others? That's all I'm..."

Tony's sentence was abruptly cut off when Cassidy delivered a stunning right hook. The agent dropped to his butt, totally dazed and completely taken aback.

No one needed to restrain Cassidy though, because she didn't continue to drive for him. She remained where she was, drilling him with a lethal glare. "*I could give you a thrashing if I really wanted to, punk,*" said her expression, "*but you're not worth the effort.*"

"Never question my loyalty to my people," she said, clipping her words and pointing at him.

Braxton hooked a hand under Tony's arm and pulled him to his feet. "Get up."

Tony gingerly rubbed his jaw, already beginning to turn colors. "I was just saying..."

"Well maybe if you did a little less saying and a little more thinking," chided Braxton, directing him towards the door, "you wouldn't be going to see the doc right now."

Jason snuck a look at Cassidy. She was glowering and looking apologetic over her actions. But only a little. She did, however, bite her lip as she wondered whether this would get put into her file too...

After Tony was gone, Braxton turned his attention back to Jason and Cassidy. He sent Cassidy a look that read something like "*I'll pretend I didn't see that this time, but get yourself in order.*"

"So anyway," he continued. "Cassidy, you and Jason are now, what you call, partners."

"What?" they both exclaimed in unison.

The chief just shrugged and headed for his office. "Deal with it."

Jason turned to Cassidy, who was now frowning. He could almost see the little black storm cloud over her head unleashing thunder and lightning.

"So, what do you want to do to kill time?" he asked.

Cassidy's bottom jaw stuck out in a pout.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

When Jason gave her a look, she insisted, "I'm not! I'd rather go to the first crime scene."

"And what makes you think you'll be any help there?"

Cassidy turned and fully faced him, hands going to her hips.

*Oh boy, here it comes! Change the subject to avoid any possible bodily damage,* screamed a thought through his mind.

"Fine," said Jason, trying to think of a different approach that would make things easier for the both of them. "If food isn't appealing, then maybe you'd like to go unload a few hundred rounds into a couple targets at the gun range?"

Now that got a response, and finally a positive one. Mild surprise on her face, he watched her expression soften a couple seconds later. Now, he realized, he was speaking her language.

Jason crossed his arms and dipped his head a moment before leaning closer. "And may I suggest you try *not* looking at your fellow colleagues as adversaries," he said quietly. "Not everyone is against you and believe it or not, some of us can be trusted."

She studied him, gauging the sincerity of his words. But his proximity and the way he was looking at her with those blue eyes made Cassidy uneasy. This time she looked away first.

"Fine," she said. "Quick bite to eat and then the range."

*Might be therapeutic to shoot a few terrorists,* she thought.

Jason nodded, and they turned headed for the door.

"Besides," he continued, "when was the last time you ate anyway? You disappear when you turn sideways."

In actuality, Cassidy really couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten, which wasn't uncommon. It came with uncertain schedules. Plus she'd had more important things on her mind than the frivolous necessity of eating. But she wasn't about to admit that little fact.

"I didn't realize you were paying that close attention, pal," she countered, "and I've always been like this, so sue me."

Jason rolled his eyes, knowing the progress they'd just made ten seconds ago had been erased. *And we're right back to where we started.*

"Hold up a sec!"

They stopped and half turned as Braxton marched up to them, envelope in hand. "This just came in," he said, handing it to Cassidy, "from your CIA friends. It's an assignment."

"How exactly is that going to work if we're partners?" asked Jason.

"You aren't going on the actual mission," replied Braxton.

That brought visible relief to Cassidy. She then turned her attention to the envelope, eyeing it almost hungrily.

"I was assured this is the only item on her plate," he continued. "Apparently it's important enough to deal with now. After this, she's back stateside where you two get to tag along together. I reminded them it looked like someone was targeting her and her team, but, like I'm really going to tangle with the CIA?"

Braxton settled a look on Cassidy. "Jason is the best at what he does. He's protected hundreds of witnesses that people have tried to kill."

"You haven't gotten anyone killed yet have you?" Cassidy asked Jason under her breath.

Jason scowled at her. "Why would you be worried? You're plenty able with a gun."

"Alright, alright," interjected Braxton. "Just get through today without hurting, or killing, each other."

He turned his attention back to Jason. "Take her to a secondary location."

Cassidy's mood soured again. *So much for the range...*

"I'll have to go grab a few things from my apartment," she mumbled, expression the epitome of distaste.

"Okay. Expect trouble since whoever is after you obviously knows where you live." Braxton turned back to his office. "Let me know when you reach the new housing."

"Yes, sir," answered Jason.

He looked back to Cassidy who frowned at him. It was then Jason decided it was going to be a very long assignment.

## Chapter 4

### Safe House

They returned to the apartment complex just after noon, and the atmosphere felt heavy as the gray clouds pressed in against the earth.

“What floor do you live on?” asked Jason, glancing at the four-story building.

“Three.”

They started up the grate stairs when something on the second level caught Cassidy’s attention. She glanced up at the next flight, then down the tunnel-like hall on her left. She’d just seen someone...

“Keep going up the next flight of stairs,” she whispered.

“But...”

“What? You’re a big, strong agent. You can take ‘em,” said Cassidy, giving him an encouraging slap on the arm before turning and walking briskly down the hall.

“That’s not...” Jason pinched the bridge of his nose.

Two rogues working together had to be as brilliant of an idea as tossing a grenade up a steep hill.

He continued up the stairs to the third level. What little light there was faded when something slammed into him. Back hitting the wall, Jason managed to wrestle the attacker off him and restore a little space with a powerful kick. That was when he saw the glint of something metallic.

Jason reacted swiftly. Latching onto the hand holding the gun, he brought his knee up hard and fast, slamming it into the assailant’s stomach. He was a stubborn bugger, though, and didn’t let go of the weapon.

Before Jason could repeat his maneuver, the man socked him smartly in the side and grunted when he landed a second blow. Jason kicked him in the knee, making something crack.

That did the trick and the assailant dropped to one knee where Jason introduced his fist to the man’s face. In a single swing, the threat was neutralized and unconscious.

He took the firearm, released the magazine, and ejected the round from the chamber. He was contemplating where he was going to secure this weapon when Cassidy crested the stairs.

That was when someone grabbed her from behind. But quick as a flash, Cassidy threw her elbow into his chest. The moment he began to step back, she proceeded to elbow him in the face. Going with the momentum, she turned and punched the daylights out of him. It was over, just like that.



Jason was impressed. He had to keep reminding himself Cassidy was actually trained.

They met in front of her apartment, part of the doorframe splintered.

“Landlord had to take a sledgehammer to it,” she explained.

With a little shoving, the door opened.

The apartment was clean and organized, unlike Jason’s. He wasn’t a complete slob, but he wasn’t this neat either. Within two minutes Cassidy had her things packed in a small duffel and backpack.

At the car, Jason said, “I should probably drive since I know where we’re going.”

Cassidy gave him a ‘yeah, right’ look as she tossed her duffel into the trunk.

Jason wouldn’t budge on the matter. “Come on,” he said, arm extended, palm up. “Let’s have the keys.”

*This isn’t going to become a habit*, thought Cassidy as she tossed them to him.

A couple minutes later, they were speeding down the freeway. “Didn’t your parents ever tell you to play nice with others, or at least respect your elders?”

Cassidy snorted. “Elders?” She raised her eyebrows. “You consider yourself an elder?”

“Technically I’m older than you.”

“Yeah,” she laughed, “by barely five years. Big whoop. And besides, you don’t exactly play nice either.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I thought it was rhetorical.”

Jason gave her another correcting glance.

“You give everyone that look?” asked Cassidy.

“No, I think it’s one I’ll reserve just for you,” he replied.

She sighed and slouched in the seat. “Do we *have* to talk about this stuff? Because I really don’t think you care.”

“If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t have asked,” countered Jason. “Besides, wasn’t it you who said it’s wise to know the people you work with?”

This was one of those times where a previously smart remark had come back to bite Cassidy in the butt. She absolutely *hated* it when that happened.

She crossed her arms. “What do you think you’re going to learn about me by asking about my parents? You a psychologist or something?”

“Good grief,” sighed Jason. “It’s just a simple question, Cassidy. Why are you making things so difficult, anyway?”

“Fine,” she said, snapping her head around to look at him. “My mom died young, would have been by the cancer but the terrorists got to her first. And my dad...just...he’s dead.”

Jason cringed for pressing the issue. "Sorry," he said quietly.

Cassidy merely gave a light shrug, and there wasn't anger in her expression or her tone, "I make a big deal about things like that because...I just don't like people knowing my personal business. And it's safer for everyone."

"Fair enough."

Almost instantly, she relaxed upon hearing him agreeing to drop the matter.

Silence settled over the car for the next half hour of driving. When it looked like they were heading into the countryside Jason asked, "Want to stop for some snacks or something?"

"Sounds good."

They walked out of the next gas station with a small bag of junk food.

"Great, this is just what I need," said Cassidy, opening a bag of Doritos, "especially when I'm going to be sitting in a car for who knows how many hours."

"I think you can afford it," replied Jason, sneaking a chip from the bag and popping it into his mouth.

Cassidy went for her Dr. Pepper and opened it, or tried to. The cap on this one was stuck.

"Want me to, uh..."

"Please."

She handed it to Jason who twisted it open with ease and handed it back to her. Cassidy took the bottle and cap and looked from one to the other. "I just loosened it for you."

Jason coughed out a chuckle as he put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road. He'd gotten through a couple more chips when an impressive belch came from the other side of the car. At least Cassidy had attempted to be polite by keeping her mouth clamped shut, but she paid a price.

Jason had a good laugh while Cassidy pinched the bridge of her nose. "Ow," she said, chuckling despite herself, "that's what you get for being polite. Man, that burns."

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she shot a look at Jason. "I'm glad you found that entertaining."

"I'm surprised you didn't just let 'er rip," he said. "You know, to establish your dominance."

Cassidy blew through her lips. "I did that back when I took out that silver car."

"What?" asked Jason, "If I recall I was the one who was doing the precision driving."

"Have you ever accurately fired out of a vehicle moving at a high rate of speed and swerving all over the place? And that wasn't precision, that was more like...convulsive jerking."

“Smart Alec.”

Cassidy let a breath pass between them before saying, “I still don’t like this arrangement. I’m telling you that on my own I can find whoever’s responsible a lot faster than an entire division. Besides, there’s almost always someone trying to kill me.”

“Speaking of killing,” said Jason, “what’s your Agency assignment? I know, I know, you can’t tell me details, but is there anything I’m going to need to do?”

“Killing?” Cassidy made a *tisk* sound with her tongue. “Is that all you think the CIA does? And your task is very simple: you wait here, I go, come back and then we solve a case.”

“So you’re headed overseas then?” inquired Jason.

“Since the Agency doesn’t have jurisdiction to execute operations within the United States, the answer would be ‘yes.’”

“How long will this take?”

“A few days. Just wrapping up my role.”

Jason took another road that directed them further into the hills.

Cassidy popped a couple chips into her mouth. “You’ve been doing government work for what? Ten years or so?”

“Twelve,” nodded Jason, “did an internship senior year of college and was offered a position. You?”

“I think I’ve been at it about a decade, tack on a few more years if you want to count the unofficial work I did with my dad.”

“Didn’t you start with the NSA or something?”

That made Cassidy smile. “Contrary to the rumors, it wasn’t the NSA. I saddled up with an experiment sister group of the Defense Intelligence Agency.”

She huffed through her nose. “Me and my big ideas...”

“Didn’t go well?”

“Oh no,” she said, looking out her window. “It went very well, actually...”

Apparently, Cassidy didn’t want to discuss that subject in depth so Jason dropped the topic. Since she was feeling so talkative, though, he figured he should take advantage of the opportunity.

“Can I ask you another question?”

“If you must,” she said flatly, obviously wishing he’d finally stop talking altogether.

“Does it bother you,” he asked, “you know, the violence involved in your work and...the other stuff?”

“Like killing, you mean?” she clarified, raising an eyebrow.

“I saw the, uh, Bible in your apartment and I assumed...”

Cassidy gave a nod, jumping to his point for him. "You're wondering about the whole 'turning the other cheek' thing? If, as a Christian, I'm supposed to love my enemies, does it bother me that I've ended up killing some very bad men?"

"...yeah."

"I will answer that question with another question: do you think evil men should be allowed to roam around, doing whatever they want without facing the consequences?"

She glanced at him, "That was rhetorical, by the way. First, there is killing and then there is murder, though people throw around the two words like they're interchangeable, when they aren't necessarily."

"Right," said Jason with a nod, "like when people misquote the sixth Commandment: do not kill."

"Exactly, when the verse actually says 'do no murder.' Anyway, no, it doesn't bother me. Now if the situation is someone insulting you, that's entirely different. Then the whole 'turn the other cheek' thing is applicable from my point of view. Now, what changes things is when my rival is coming at me with the intention of killing me. My conscience is clear because I do not kill with malicious intent. I don't like to do it, but sometimes it's the only way to protect innocent people from being massacred. Often when you're dealing with evil men, especially those in the occult, they give you no other choice. It's either you or them."

Cassidy blew through her lips. "I mean, sure it would be nice if we could all get along and hold hands and sing. But in this world, there is always going to be at least one person, or one group, vying for power and total control, who will destroy anyone who gets in their way. And other people create chaos just for the fun of it."

Jason started a little when she suddenly twisted in her seat to look at him.

"And are we just supposed to just let evil men walk all over us? How about getting away with slaughtering thousands of people? Scripture itself has very harsh words about injustice, letting evil men walk away free and oppressing the innocent."

Cassidy spoke with her hands now, flailing them around for emphasis. "Yes! Please! Kick down my door and come on in! Massacre my family and do whatever vile things you want because we're just going to take it all lying down!"

Then she pointed at him. "There are situations that call for 'turning the other cheek', but may God judge me ever so severely if I do whatever I have to, to keep my people safe, or to stop an attack that will wipe out masses of innocent people. While God is love and merciful and compassionate, He's also a lover of justice. Sometimes He executes it Himself, other times He uses other people...not to mention The Judgment is going to be pretty rough on some people."

Cassidy took a breath and was about to add something but stopped herself and clamped her mouth shut.

"What?" he asked, "I agree with everything you've said, so you're in good company."

Instead, Cassidy just gave a shake of her head and took another sip of Dr. Pepper.

They kept up light, sporadic conversation as dusk fell over the hills before silence settled in again. The next time Jason glanced over at Cassidy, he saw she was asleep, slumped awkwardly against the door.

Returning his gaze to the road, pavement illuminated by the headlights, his thoughts kept him company as the hours stretched on. He wondered where all this was leading: the assassinations of Cassidy's team, the murder of their contact and the attempted murder of Cassidy herself.

Jason scowled. How serious was this whole situation going to get? Of course...he realized, he probably could have avoided all of this if he hadn't gone into work on a day off in the first place.



The car bounced as it went over the pothole-covered gravel road. Evidently, no one had bothered to grade or smooth it for the past decade.

At the next hole, the car bottomed out, scraping against the ground.

Cassidy shot awake, ready for action.

"Sorry," said Jason, "the road looks like it was caught in the middle of a mortar attack."

Cassidy brushed the loose strands of hair from her eyes as a small house appeared around the next bend. The lights were on inside but no other vehicles were parked out front.

Something about it gave Jason pause. Cassidy eyed the place suspiciously and then glanced into the woods surrounding their vehicle.

Jason caught a glimpse of a dark figure outside Cassidy's door a second before she threw it open and knocked someone to the ground. She was on him instantly, gun drawn.

"Easy!" said the man, hands raised.

"Who are you?" she growled.

"Special Agent Greene."

Cassidy kept the gun trained on him a second longer before holstering it. "Get up."

Jason had his door open, arm resting on the roof of the car. If Cassidy wasn't mistaken, he was grinning.

"What are *you* smiling at?" she scowled, closing the passenger door.

"Sorry if I startled you," said Greene.

Cassidy mumbled a response before he and Jason exchanged quick hellos. She surveyed the dark forest. A gust of wind slammed against the trees, tugging at her clothes and bringing a chill that had nothing to do with the cool evening.

Jason got back in the car and pulled it in front of the house before killing the engine. Cassidy reached him just as he was opening the trunk. He pulled out her duffel and she snatched it from him, continuing to mumble something.

Jason tried not to smile.

As Cassidy tromped into the house, Greene looked at Jason. "Got a lively one, huh?"

"Well, you know that saying," chuckled Jason, "dynamite comes in small packages."

After getting settled inside, Greene introduced them to the second agent, Thomas Byrd. Neither Green nor Byrd had gotten the memo that Cassidy would, in fact, be leaving and they could have spent their night watching the game and throwing back a few beers.

Jason contacted Braxton and asked if they'd gotten any new information on the murders. Nope, nothing useful yet. The agent on Cassidy's team, who had suffered an apparent heart attack while running, was found to have small traces of poison in his system. The second agent was said to have accidentally fallen from the balcony of the five story building he lived in.

While conversing with Braxton and getting this information, Jason frequently glanced at Cassidy.

She had planted herself on the old couch in the rustic living room that faced an old fireplace, feet on the old coffee table. The sofa practically swallowed her. But the entire time he was talking with the chief, she was messing with her cell phone.

He just shrugged. Who knew what she was doing.

Agents Greene and Byrd sat in chairs at one end of the coffee table, playing poker.

When Jason finished talking with Braxton he sat down on the couch with Cassidy. He quickly relayed the information from the chief to Cassidy. Jason noticed the entire time she continued playing with her phone.

Finally Cassidy stuck it in her coat pocket. "They're going up the chain of command, like I said earlier."

Jason just looked at her.

"The ambush in Africa was to take out as many agents as possible, if not the entire team. Now whoever is behind it is going after those of us who survived. Gregg Bennett would be considered the 'rookie' out of the remaining unit. He's the one with the least experience. Marty Sharp was a level above him..."

Jason nodded. "How many agents are left besides you?"

"Two."

He frowned.

Cassidy glanced at her watch and managed to escape from the couch's grasp. She then grabbed the small black backpack she had retrieved sometime when Jason hadn't noticed.

“I need to head out,” she said, and he tossed her the keys. “See you in a few.”

“Right,” replied Jason, expression clouding.

“I will.”

“How do you know for sure?”

Cassidy stopped, hand on the doorknob and half turned. She could easily read the serious doubt on his face.

She gave him a ‘you worry too much’ look and replied with, “See you later.”

And then she was out the door and into the darkness.

## Chapter 5

### Revenge

Gazing down disappointedly at the subject, he stripped off his bloodied latex gloves, before turning and tossing them into a large open trashcan.

“The incubation period still isn’t long enough,” he said, tearing off the gore covered scrubs and throwing them away also.

“Not long enough?” came a voice through a speaker. “We’re at eight days.”

He stepped through the automatic door into the decontamination chamber, which hissed and sealed shut. He closed his eyes as an impressive blast of air roared over him. Thirty seconds later it was finished and the second door unlocked.

He pushed through it and joined his assistant at a long counter lined with monitors. “Yes, not long enough,” he continued, looking through the large window into the autopsy room where the subject, another human corpse, lay on a metal table.

“Fourteen days is the goal,” he explained, typing some notes into the computer in front of him. “The longer we have until the initial outbreak, the more people we can infect before someone catches on...I’ve told you this already.”

“It’s already disguised, quite well I might add, as a flu virus,” reminded the assistant.

“And yet,” said the boss, saving his notes then sending the document to his phone, “I’m the one who’s signing your checks.”

“Understood.”

“Get the cleanup crew in there and have them toss the body into the furnace after nightfall. I should have the necessary modifications by tomorrow, then we can arrange for more trials.”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

The boss turned and walked briskly out of the room. A narrow concrete tunnel led him straight a good fifty meters before running into a steep staircase. He climbed to the top of the dozen or so stairs, swiped his access card, punched in the code, and then pushed the heavy metal door open.

Muggy evening air greeted him and a rather blustery wind danced about him on his short trek across the scrubby landscape to a small house. He went through a side door and practically charged up the stairs.

The entire second level was open with a number of large dry erase boards on the wall at the top of the steps and on the left. Computers and several large monitors lined the opposite wall. It left the far wall open for light to come through the ceiling to floor windows.



He tossed his phone onto the desk in the center of the room and shrugged off his coat. After pulling up viral simulations and DNA structures on the monitors, he crossed to the boards covered with formulas and equations.

He stood there for some time, letting his brilliant mind work over everything. Occasionally he'd spin and march over to the computers, alter a code or equation and run a simulation.

The sun sank below the western horizon and twilight had fallen over the land before he realized it. He'd been up for twenty straight hours and still wasn't tired.

In the past week, he'd attacked his work with new urgency. He only got a few hours of sleep a night, but even then he wasn't drained. In fact, with every passing day he was feeling more energized. It allowed for great amounts of progress to be made.

He walked back to the table, where a crinkled photograph lay taped in the middle. And it had all been made possible because of the person in the picture. Not because this was an individual of inspiration. Just the opposite. He hated her with every ounce of his being.

He glared at the photo, feeling fiery anger surge through him. With a growl, he ripped it off the table and stormed to the windows. His fingers dug into the paper, adding new creases.

Oh did they have a history. She was the only one who'd crossed him, actually thwarted his plans, and was still breathing. Everyone else he'd hunted down and destroyed. Any person who ever stood in his way met a slow, agonizing end because, well, he'd always had a fascination with pain and suffering.

But this woman...

He crumpled the picture in one hand. Three times they'd met, and three times she'd frustrated his schemes. And every encounter was the equivalent of having an arrow in his side turned slowly, grinding deeper.

It wasn't just that she'd stopped him. There was something different about this opponent; she was truly unafraid of him, despite his reputation. She wasn't scared off or deterred no matter how bad things got. She just drove harder, relentless; like a wolf that tasted human blood and wouldn't stop until it was killed. She was driven by something deeper, something...spiritual. And he recognized her as a legitimate threat.

Their last encounter left him plotting her slow demise, but she was difficult to track. Then he'd been given this great new idea for slaughtering millions of people and it distracted him.

Until last week. He couldn't tell if it was some kind of irritating divine intervention or the darkness aligning itself because she suddenly popped up on the radar. She and her team had nearly walked into one of his former test facilities in Somalia.

Now he was all but consumed with his malice for this scum of a human being. He found out a couple days before they were supposed to move on the facility and made plans accordingly.

He allowed himself a twisted little smile. It was funny how much money could buy: a rebel militia group, informants inside the FBI who had information on his target and could keep an eye on her.

He'd already figured out how he was going to kill her. Like the climatic ending of a thriller novel, he could picture it, how every detail would play out. Now it was just a matter of writing each step that would lead to her ultimate death.

Still, he often let his mind wander through all the different ways he could kill her. The possibilities were endless. Capture and torture? How about a slow death via hemorrhagic fever?

As much as he loved that idea, he'd have to keep to the original plan. It was the best for tearing her down slowly, snuffing out every last person she cared for, leaving her alone.

A thrill of anticipation ran down his spine as he looked out the windows. It was dark, so the employees would be firing up the furnace to begin burning all the evidence. No one passing by would be able to see the plumes of smoke under the cover of night.

Every last person on the staff would actually wind up in the incinerator within the next week. Everything would be cleaned up, burned out and he'd be long gone before anyone came upon this place. Then it would be time to initiate another phase of his plan.

With cool gray eyes, he glanced down at the photo in his hand...a picture of Cassidy Jackson.

## Chapter 6

### Reminder

*“India and Bravo have secured the first package! Who has eyes on the second?”*

*“He’s running north, Swahili Street! Heading for the market!”*

Cassidy caught just a glimpse of him as she skidded out of the alley, streets wet from the intermittent thunderstorms sightseeing over the city. Running down the road, she dodged between the other pedestrians, keeping her eyes on the target.

The city was crowded this time of day, but it was also the best opportunity to grab the people the team had been hunting for months.

The man ducked left into the market. Cassidy slowed as she reached the corner of the building to make sure he wasn’t lying in wait. Breathing steadily even after her run, she peered around the corner.

The target slowed to a stop at the first vendor. He looked around quickly for his pursuers. When none immediately jumped out at him, he turned and began to walk more calmly down the road.

“He’s walking through the market now,” said Cassidy quietly, “still heading north.” She walked down another row of vendors parallel to the target, staying twenty feet behind and to the right.

The target stopped suddenly, attention drawn to something off his left shoulder.

Cassidy heard the agent codenamed Yankee swear through her earpiece. *“It’s local military. They’re headed right for the plaza.”*

The target took off again. Cassidy followed.

*“I see you, Sierra. I’ll try to come up and flank him from the left...”*

Shouts came from behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder. The local military had stopped their truck at the edge of the market and were piling out. She looked at the target, who had checked on their position also.

He turned back around and collided head-on with an officer.

Reacting without thinking, the target punched him, wrestled his firearm from him, and then shot him. That was more than enough to draw the attention of the military personnel, and they spotted him right before he disappeared down another alley.

“Be advised, the target is now armed,” said Cassidy, giving way to the chase again. “Heading east down Pemba.”

She passed the road he’d turned down and made for the next alley on the right. She didn’t want to be directly behind him in a line of sight, or fire. The target was still in flight mode, reacting first instead of thinking.

Cassidy kicked it into high gear down the side street, mindful of the random stacks of crates. She could have done without the hot, muggy air that made her clothes cling to her. But then again, what did one expect in a city that was on the edge of the Indian Ocean?

*"Where's our ride located?"* asked Yankee.

*"Lumumba Street,"* was the response.

*"Guys, can we grab him by then?"*

*"No problem,"* breathed Cassidy.

She rocketed out of the alley and across the road. The target was half a dozen strides ahead of her now, to the right. That was when he spotted Charlie, coming from his right. He skittered to a stop and wheeled around, searching for a hideout.

The instant he turned, Cassidy stopped and crouched behind a car in the long string of vehicles in the crowded street. It was difficult to stop on a dime because of her forward momentum. But the car was able to remedy that as she rammed into it.

This odd behavior earned some looks from bystanders, but she didn't care about them. She peeked over the vehicle in time to see the target run into a store. Charlie was right behind him, with Yankee on his heels.

Cassidy jogged across the road and into the alley that ran along the building. The next street was Lumumba, so they had to make sure they took custody of their target.

*"Sierra, I'm on the south side of the building the package ran into,"* said Echo.

*"What's your twenty?"*

*"Alley, north side near the pickup location,"* replied Cassidy, stepping out onto the sidewalk and studying the front of the building.

*"Watch him!"* shouted Charlie.

*"Down!"*

She could clearly hear the gunshots outside the building, as could the pedestrians.

*"He's headed upstairs!"*

*"I'll take the other set and we'll cut him off!"*

The people exchanged looks and slowly began moving away from the structure, especially after Cassidy grabbed one of the exterior support beams and began scaling it. On top of the awning, she climbed onto the ledge that ran along the second story windows.

When she looked inside she could see straight down the main hall which led to the stairs. It was an old single pane of glass so Cassidy didn't have any trouble completely kicking it out.

Not seconds later, their target came stumbling up the stairs and she ducked out of view.

Charlie came down the hall on the left, but when their man rounded the corner, he doubled back, completely oblivious to the fact he had a gun in his hand. Yankee came up the same stairs the target had and the man backpedaled.

There was no time for a standoff though. Someone grabbed the target from behind, pulled him out a broken window and tossed him to the sidewalk below where Echo was waiting.

Cassidy climbed down as their ride pulled up. Echo shoved their target, now complete with a cloth bag over his head, into the backseat. They climbed in on either side of him.

Yankee and Charlie hopped into a second car and they disappeared into afternoon traffic.

“Nice trick back there,” said Echo, still panting lightly from the run and excitement. He was a British native and had the accent to match.

Cassidy chuckled as she pulled the solid tan tactical scarf from her face. She rubbed her eyes and would be glad when she could finally take the colored contacts out.

“Thanks, took a long time to perfect.”

The sun found a break in the clouds, burning brightly as they turned onto the main road that hugged the coastline. The light made the thunderheads over the city of Dar es Salaam look even more ominous, darker.

“Who are you people?” asked their target.

“Shut it,” chided Echo. “I don’t want to talk to you yet.”

He and Cassidy glanced at the man between them, then exchanged a look. He was visibly shaking already. This would likely be a short and fruitful conversation.

They stopped on the outskirts of the city as thunder rumbled around in the sky. A humid breeze kicked up, bringing a mixed scent of desert and rain.

They transferred their target to a small, abandoned, tin-roofed house. It didn’t have air conditioning, but it made up for it with the ocean view.

Echo shoved their man into a chair in the open area between the kitchen and living room. Then he yanked the sack from his head.

“Hello, Omar,” said Cassidy, scarf back in place over her nose. The man didn’t need to see her face to know she was smiling. He heard it in her voice and saw it in her brown eyes.

He was the new number-two guy in a splinter cell of al Shabab. He’d first popped up on their radar in Syria. Moving shortly after to Lebanon he was very active, close to Hezbollah leaders.

He knew people, had access to future plans and they wanted what was in his head. But he vanished shortly after a string of small strikes on Israel and before they could nab

him. They'd spent eight months tracking Omar, gathering intelligence, working informants. And wouldn't you know it? He popped up on the grid in Tanzania last week.

"I swear I don't know anything!" he exclaimed, holding his hands up, palms out.

Echo laughed as he walked into the kitchen behind Omar, "My friend, if you knew nothing you wouldn't be here."

He pulled open a drawer, retrieved a file, and then returned.

"So how's working for al Shabab been going for you?" asked Cassidy, stepping over to the ancient wooden table. She started to lean on it but stopped when she saw the surface.

"Man," she said, wiping her hand over the top. "They forgot to clean up from the last interrogation."

Omar's eyes couldn't have grown any wider when he saw the table was stained with semi-dried blood.

Echo sighed. "How many times do we have to remind them?"

Of course it wasn't real blood, and they didn't truly use such gruesome interrogation tactics. Usually or officially. It was all for the psychological effect and the impact it had on their target.

It worked quite well.

Omar looked from Cassidy to Echo.

"I tell you, Ali is the boss here," he practically pleaded. "He's the one who plans the attacks. It was his idea to blow the pipeline. I just moved here..."

"Yes, from Lebanon," nodded Echo, gesturing with the file. "Hezbollah probably kept you pretty busy, eh? Then I see you made a few stops in Iraq to attack NATO and US forces. Then you hopped down to Egypt where you began your little trip south and ended up right here. Seems you gave yourself plenty to do along the way."

"I did not plan anything," implored Omar. "I had nothing to do with the two attacks in Iraq. I was already in Cairo!"

"Come on," said Cassidy, turning to Echo. "Let's just get to what and who he knows. I'm hungry and want to wrap this up so I can eat lunch. Jumper cables are in the closet..."

"No, no please!" Omar looked like he was about to wet himself. On the edge of the chair, he was practically on his knees. "Look, yes, I can tell you some things. Yes? I know who planned the attack on NATO forces and built the bombs."

He scooted forward a little more, "And, and who attacked the American outpost in Somalia!"

Now that got Cassidy's attention. She and Echo shared a look before he asked, "What do you think you know about Somalia?"

“I have a friend close to one of the rebel groups there,” replied Omar, only so happy to answer. “They were hired to ambush the Americans. They don’t know the man, but he worked nearby or...how you say? Something like that?”

“That’s it?” asked Echo, feigning disappointment.

“He said there was supposed to be a special forces, black ops team or something to help the spies,” blurted Omar. “But said he’d take care of it.”

Echo gave a slight nod before turning and stepping outside the house to make a call.

Omar shifted uncomfortably under the relentless gaze of this other agent standing there, arms crossed. He only knew she was a she because of her voice. Her clothes gave no hints and the tactical scarf covered her entire torso.

The sound of the backdoor opening drew Cassidy’s attention and Omar had just flinched forward to make a move for her. But the feel of a cool blade against his throat brought him to an instant stop.

He’d never seen the knife in her hand, nor had he seen her draw it.

“Whoa,” she said coolly. “Ela wein enta tarow?”

Literally, Eastern Arabic dialect for “to where are you going?”

Omar slowly sat back down as Charlie and Yankee appeared from the back of the living room. They were exchanging nods when Echo walked back inside.

“For you,” he said, handing a satellite phone to Cassidy.

She took her leave and stood looking out over the ocean. “This is Jackson.”

“*I’m told our friend had a little information on the ambush of your FBI team in Somalia,*” said a familiar voice.

Cassidy couldn’t keep from smiling. “That’s correct, boss.”

“*We assumed as much. Our people on the ground there noted a connection to Omar, though he wasn’t directly involved. What he told you was confirmed. A single male paid a rebel group to plant the explosives. We don’t have a name yet and all we know about him is he’s Caucasian, middle-aged, gray eyes, dark hair.*”

That triggered something in the back of her mind, but she couldn’t pin it down at the moment. Her brain was going a hundred miles an hour processing other things. “So this assignment had two purposes. The first was to close this part of the case, apprehend the man we’ve been tracking for a year. The second...”

“*Yes, was to get you some raw intel on the ambush. There’s actually a third purpose and it’s just a simple reminder of what you’re missing...when you’re ready to come back to the Agency and work for someone who will actually let you off your leash, just let me know.*”

That made Cassidy’s smile broaden. Undoubtedly, Agency life overseas fitted her much better than cases involving domestic affairs. Her former boss fully understood because...he’d been the one to pick her out of the experimental DIA program.

“Always appreciate it.”

*“Take care of yourself, kid. I hear someone’s going after the remainder of the team...”*

As if in response, the sun disappeared and thunder growled close by. A dark expression settled over Cassidy’s face as a humid breeze tugged at her clothes. “Don’t worry, sir...you know I don’t go down without putting up one heck of a fight.”



## Chapter 7

### **Suspect List**

“If you hadn’t heard, I’m her partner. It’s been a couple days since she left and I just want to know if everything is okay.”

Jason Stayton was standing toe to toe with intelligence officer John Terret at division headquarters. The man had just arrived, claiming to be a former associate of Cassidy’s.

“She asked me to dig around and hunt some leads before she left,” he’d explained, “I did, and I have some information relevant to your case.”

John’s hazel eyes studied Jason with great intelligence, and he got the sense he was reading him like an open book, much like Cassidy. *It must be a spy trait or something*, he thought.

“She’s fine,” answered Terret, “and I’d expect her to be in shortly.”

“Ah! There you are,” came Chief Braxton’s voice behind Jason. “I heard you were coming in.”

He shook hands with Terret. “I greatly appreciate you helping us out on this. We’re not getting any assistance from our own people.”

“I understand,” he said with a nod. “Everyone has a lot on their plates. But the Agency is always keenly interested in what happens in its international backyard. The massacre of American agents, and the near killing of a former fellow intelligence officer is serious business.”

“Good to see you playing nice with the commoners, John.”

Jason jumped when Cassidy suddenly appeared beside him. She was tanner than three days ago, and there was a twinkle in her blue eyes that hadn’t been there before.

John smiled as they shook hands and gripped one another by the shoulder. He said something in a language Jason didn’t understand. Cassidy replied in the same language, and they both shared a laugh.

Jason’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t like John sixty seconds ago and that didn’t change now. He was surprised Cassidy was actually...nice to him. She’d also addressed him by his first name.

They were friends, he realized an instant later. That bugged him and he didn’t know why. Okay, he did, but it was nothing he wanted to admit or think about presently.

“Conference room is back here,” said Braxton, who’d enjoyed watching the little exchange—and Jason’s reaction.

Turning, he led the way down the row of desks. When Jason looked at Cassidy, she was already looking at him. That mischievous sparkle was still in her eyes, like she knew a secret. Or, more accurately, knew about the spark of jealousy that he was feeling.

“Play nice,” she whispered, sending him a wink before following Braxton. It seemed she’d been recharged on her assignment and he was finally seeing the other, un-grouchy side of her personality. Or maybe it was just because her friend John, a CIA buddy, was here.

Regardless, her comment actually made him blush. Clearing his throat, Jason gestured for Terret to go first. The intelligence officer nodded and walked after Cassidy, with Jason falling into stride behind.

The rest of the team was already in the room and everyone took a seat. Braxton remained standing at the end of the table.

“I’m glad to see Cassidy back in one piece,” he began, “and that we have at least one friend at the Agency, Officer Terret. He has been kind enough to take time out of his schedule to do some digging for us.”

He pointed at the stack of papers in the middle of the table. “First order of business: Bob Dexton’s death was officially ruled accidental. Those are copies of the ME report and crime scene photos.”

That drew an immediate reaction from Cassidy and Jason. Braxton nodded. “I know.”

Cassidy leaned forward and snatched one up. After a couple seconds, she shook her head, “This is wrong. There were long scruff marks on the floor at the top of the stairs and marks on the toes of his shoes, clearly indicating he was dragged.”

“How’d you know?” asked Logan.

“Because I went to the crime scene.”

“I was there too,” Braxton sighed, “And that’s a whole mess in and of itself that I can’t even think about taking on right now. So that aside, I got hold of the commanding officer of the special ops team who was supposed to meet up with Cassidy’s unit. They say they never received confirmation you were even in the country, so they scrapped the mission.”

*Which is what I should have done*, she thought, mentally kicking herself again. “I contacted our communications officer as soon as we landed so we could set up a rendezvous. We were set to meet...”

“I know something about that,” said Terret, on Cassidy’s right. “Our agents over there looked into it and someone hijacked your call, Cassidy. That wasn’t your coms officer you were talking to. It was an unknown and yet-to-be-identified individual.”

The wheels in her brain were turning. “They knew all the lingo, exactly what to say so as not to send up any red flags...whoever knew we were coming had some serious reach and knew exactly what to do to make sure we were there by ourselves.”

That reminded her. “Which ties in directly to what I learned on my assignment.”

Terret looked at Cassidy. “There was actually a connection between that case and this one?”

She nodded. “A single unknown male bought out a rebel group to carry out the ambush on my team. My friend also told me this person would take care of the special forces team that was supposed to go in with us.”

“Wow,” said Terret.

“I know,” replied Cassidy, “funny how things like that come together. I even got an extremely vague description.”

Terret pushed back from the table and walked to the large flat screen at the other end of the room. “I compiled a number of profiles of the particularly nasty individuals you helped take down,” he turned on the screen and paused to look over his shoulder at her. “The ones still alive, that is.”

That earned her looks from the others.

Cassidy just shrugged. “What?”

Terret synced his phone to the monitor and dozens of profiles popped up, appearing in two rows of five at a time.

“There were only three people everyone on the team members crossed paths with at one time or another,” she pointed out, “and they’re either deceased or don’t match the description.”

“Now how do you know that?” asked Logan.

“Because I read everyone’s file.”

“She’s read up on everyone here,” added Jason.

That immediately made them shift a little in their seats. Again, Cassidy just shrugged.

“How about a personal agenda?” asked Terret.

Cassidy scowled. “I don’t think it’s personal.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s no evidence at all that suggests it is.”

“Well, there isn’t any that proves it’s not,” chimed Tony, sitting opposite her.

Cassidy, still on unhappy terms with this agent, threw him a look. “Thank you for that non-statement, Tony.”

“I’m just trying to help!”

When a more sinister expression crossed her face, he clammed up and sank down in his chair. Subconsciously he rubbed his jaw, now nicely bruised.

Terret watched the exchange, and Jason saw a corner of his mouth twitch upward. His expression said he'd experienced, or at least witnessed, physical repercussions of Cassidy's wrath.

"You haven't heard from either of your two teammates have you?" asked Kara. "We still haven't been able to locate them."

That gave Cassidy pause before she answered. "No, not since I got back. Knowing them they probably dumped their phones the second they heard Bennett and Sharp were dead. I can find 'em, it'll just take a little time."

"Since we don't have much more to go on at the moment," said Braxton. "Why not give Terret's idea a go? It'll give us some kind of direction while we wait for you to find your team members."

Cassidy tilted her head in acknowledgment and swiveled around to look at the screen. Terret sat back down and handed her his phone, which she used to scroll through the pages of profiles. When she came to one in particular she said, "Aw, you put our friend Naphtali up there."

Terret looked back at her. "I did," he smiled. "He'd actually make a great suspect. Business has been booming in North Africa, so he was 'in the area' at the time of the ambush."

Cassidy enlarged the profile and filled in the others on the details. "Morgan Naphtali is a seriously big-time overseas weapons dealer. He supplies anyone; terrorists, rebels, militaries, pirates. And he's also the go-to guy for someone looking to have a job done, as in, ambush government agents. He knows anyone and everyone equipped to carry out something like that."

"Like a matchmaker for mob bosses looking to put out a hit on someone," commented Logan, "matches the boss with the right group and there you have it."

Cassidy smiled. "Exactly. He's one slippery son of a snake though. Too bad he doesn't match the description."

She continued scrolling, "The last useful piece of information my friend gave me was our mastermind was working in the area."

The same thought struck her and Terret at the same time as they turned and looked directly at one another. "Maybe your presence startled him," said Terret, "and he was forced to act to keep you from stumbling onto whatever he was doing..."

"Exactly what was your assignment?" asked Jason as Terret stood and walked to the single desktop computer in the corner.

Cassidy faced the group. "A shell company here in the US was being used to provide funds for a terrorist group. However, a local militia was actually tapping in and skimming money off the top, putting it in their pockets."

"How would they know how to do that?" asked Kara.

Cassidy smiled slyly. “Their ‘accountant’ is an American-born and raised individual. His fee is minimal. He just wants to be able to live in the area and not be harassed by the rebels. He’s avoiding countless fraud and racketeering charges here stateside.”

“So he thought he’d just help out a bloodthirsty militia,” said Logan. “Great retirement plan.”

“Anyway, not only were we going to grab the accountant, we were also going to nab some of the militia leaders and use them to get to the terrorist cell.”

“Wow, that’s...complicated,” surmised Tony.

Cassidy chuckled. “That’s one of the main problems with drone attacks. Taking out leaders, fine, because there are some people that just need killing. But you can also kill off a lot of useful information. It’s the mid-level guys you want because they know things, have contact with the leaders and handle resources.”

“Here’s the latest satellite imagery of the area,” piped Terret, pulling it up on the monitor. “It’s a week old.”

There was a smattering of shacks to the southwest and a cluster of buildings, some burned out, to the northeast. The image had been taken at night, so it wasn’t exactly crystal clear. But they could still identify details in the landscape.

“What’s that thick plume of smoke to the southwest?” asked Cassidy.

“It’s coming from a single, medium-sized structure,” nodded Terret. “I’m not aware of any major industrial activities in the area. I’ll ask about it.”

Meanwhile, all this was stirring a memory in the back of Cassidy’s mind. There was something vaguely familiar about this, about Africa, the smoke...

“Mmm,” mused Cassidy as she pulled the profiles back up and continued scrolling, with purpose this time. When she reached the fourth page she jerked upright.

“I completely forgot about him,” she whispered to herself, pulling up the profile as she slowly got to her feet.

Terret’s expression had too grown serious when he looked at the photo.

Walking to the screen, Cassidy ran her hand over her mouth. All she could think was *oh man, oh man, oh man...*

She looked at Terret and pointed at the profile. “We need to get confirmation on that building. If he really is behind this...”

“Sloan?” came Logan’s voice behind them. “He only has one name?”

“Yes, that’s the only one we know of and the only one he’s ever gone by,” replied Terret. He looked at Cassidy and they started up a flurry of a conversation in a language no one knew. If Jason had to guess, it sounded like Russian.

Things quickly became excited, the two agents leaning towards each other, gesturing with their hands.

At length, Cassidy returned to English and said sharply, "They need to know, John."

John exhaled sharply and put his hands on his hips, facial muscles tight. He held his peace, but he was clearly unhappy.

Cassidy looked at the others. "If there ever was a villain to be truly afraid of, it would be this man. There are scumbags, dirtbags and evil men. Sloan is evil. He comes from a line of Nazi commanders and is rather proud of the fact. He hates Jews and, as of late, Christians. He also has to be one of the most brilliant people I have ever met. He plays with lethal viral strains for fun and then kidnaps Jews or Christians in the immediate area to experiment on them. He also has a thing for pain and inflicting human suffering, thus, he's a sadist."

She shifted her weight a little, glancing at Jason. "We've met three different times, first in Africa which, as we all know, is a great place to find strains of Ebola and cholera. Second time we chased him out of the tribal regions of Afghanistan where he was taking a brief break from his experiments and supplying NATO troop movements to terrorists. Last run in was Cairo, where he was finding members of the underground church and hiring local radicals to kidnap them so he could torture them."

She blew through her lips. "Each time we managed to stop him from launching a plan that would have killed tens of thousands of people."

"Is he the vengeful type?" asked Kara, looking a bit pale.

Cassidy nodded. "Very much so. The other agents on point with me have all been murdered.

"Everyone except Cassidy," interjected Terret sharply, "who has managed to stay off his radar so far."

"If," emphasized Cassidy, "that is Sloan's building he was using for more experiments, *if* he's behind the ambush, then there are a few points I need to make."

"Yeah, like he's onto your trail again," bit out Terret. "You know he's been looking for you. It's just a sick game to him."

Cassidy snapped her head around and looked at him. She delivered several choice words in a different language and he remained silent but glowering.

"I'm not afraid of him," she said evenly, looking at him pointedly before gazing at the others. "But I would be...concerned...for the rest of you. Understand that Sloan has a very effective way of cutting people down. He takes out people around his target to isolate them before taking the person he's focused on. If he thinks you all are close to me..."

Cassidy fidgeted a little and lifted her eyes to Chief Braxton, "He'll do to you what he's doing to my team and pick you off one by one. It's a completely different thing when

you're being hunted, as opposed to being the hunter. And he doesn't just kill quickly... he knows there are worse things than death."

Tony just blinked. "Like what?"

Cassidy sighed. "Like torture, Tony."

She tossed Terret's phone back to him. "If this is Sloan...you all should likely drop the case and quickly. He already knows where I am and the longer I'm here the longer you all are at risk."

That got a generally negative response.

"We're government agents," piped Logan. "It's our job to chase bad men. Of course is dangerous, we're fully aware of the risks."

"Yeah," countered Cassidy, "that's exactly what the others said before they wound up on meat hooks or hemorrhaged blood from every orifice in their bodies."

The color drained from Tony's face, and Kara grimaced at the mental picture.

"Can we wait for confirmation, though, before fully committing to action?" asked Braxton.

He looked at Terret. "How long would that take?"

The officer checked the time on his phone and mentally calculated the time difference. "Maybe twelve hours."

"Well, until then," said Cassidy, heading for the door. "I'm going to go find my two people."

She was out of the conference room and heading down a row of desks by the time Jason caught up to her. "Wait a second, please."

Only out of sheer courtesy, and the fact she was finally warming to Jason, did Cassidy stop and face him.

"You think you're going out there by yourself?" he asked. "Last time I checked, we were still partners...although we've spent more time apart than...together..."

Cassidy almost smiled. "Right now it's better to play it safe. I'm trained to sneak around off the grid and I can find my men faster alone."

"I may not be a spy," replied Jason, "but I can take care of myself just fine."

"Now isn't the time—"

"What?" he asked. "You think I'd just get in your way?"

"No," she snapped before resting a hand on her forehead and closing her eyes a moment. "You don't understand."

She took a breath and looked up at him, smallest trace of sadness in her expression now. "Allowing you to come with me would be putting you in Sloan's direct line of fire, and I will not do that. I'm designed to work alone because every single time I'm put on a team, nearly everyone ends up dying. That is just how it is."

“That’s just a lie,” replied Jason. “You can’t believe it. You and agents like you are involved in a lot of high-risk assignments, so of course people are doing to die.”

“If only you knew the half of it...”

She reset her jaw, gaze stubborn. “No more people are going to die on my account, and I will not knowingly put you in harm’s way.”

“And what if you’re wrong?” he asked. “What if it’s not Sloan?”

“Then I will still be glad we had this conversation.”

Cassidy pressed her hands together, as if to pray. “Please, Jason, wait here.”

He exhaled a long breath and dropped his head in acceptance. She stepped a little closer to draw his gaze again, her expression softer.

“Thank you,” she said quietly before turning and walking briskly out of the room.

“She must like you.”

He straightened and glanced over at Terret as the intelligence officer joined his side. Jason snorted. “I seriously have no idea how you figure that.”

Terret grinned. “Usually she threatens bodily harm to anyone who thinks about following her.”

Jason huffed a laugh.

“But in all seriousness,” continued Terret, “if you’re going to partner up with Cassidy Jackson, be careful. She’s a rare type of agent who can go into the darkest places, be in the most dangerous situations and still come out with success. She’s danced with some of the most ruthless men on the planet, been in a number of dodgy situations and still comes out with victory. Everyone else who has tried to run with her...didn’t do well. They didn’t have the same kind of...how do I say this? Protection?”

“You’re talking about faith, aren’t you?” asked Jason, “Angelic guardians, divine intervention?”

“Exactly. Now, in spite of everything I just said, I also believe that if she keeps crossing men like Sloan...she’s going to meet her end long before it was intended to come.”

Jason studied the spy, waiting for his point.

“All that to say,” said Terret, looking at him, “that Cassidy needs someone to tell her when to stop. She’ll run herself into the ground, Jason, I’ve seen her do it before and during a time she was dealing with loss of fellow agents.”

“And what makes you think she’ll listen to me?” asked Jason.

“For one, she hasn’t punched you yet,” answered Terret. “But if she knows you’re truly concerned, that you care and aren’t saying anything because of obligation, or as some means to an end, she’ll listen. She just needs to know she can trust you.”

“I think tracking a terrorist in the Afghan mountains would be easier,” quipped Jason.



Terret laughed heartily and slapped him on the back. “Well, I gotta get things rolling with this whole confirmation deal. See you later.”

“Yea, see you,” called Jason as the spy disappeared into the hallway.

No, thought Jason sarcastically to himself as he stood alone in the office, *this isn't going to be difficult at all.*

## **Chapter 8**

### **Distance**

Plumes of black smoke rose into the still dawn air, the columns thinner now than when the furnace had been fired up the previous evening. The stench of burning flesh was heavy over the area, but not even the buzzards approached this place.

Sloan climbed into the back of the jeep with only a small duffel and two medium metal containers. From all the years traveling as a young boy, he'd long learned how to pack light. Essentials only, especially if you might have to relocate at the drop of a hat.

The driver and passenger in front of him, both natives, kept their gazes forward. Gears grinding, the jeep lurched forward and started down the game trail. Driver and passenger started up a conversation among themselves, something about a leopard sneaking another goat from the village.

Sloan was studying the paling sky when his phone rang. “Yes?”

*“You wanted to be kept updated about her movements...”*

“And?”

*“She left headquarters two days ago to find one of her team members, Steven Alcom. We've already located him and are following him. They've made contact so it's likely they'll meet soon.”*

Sloan was relieved to hear that the first part of his orders had been followed correctly. Nothing ruined a perfectly-timed plan more than when someone jumped the gun.

“Just remember what I told you,” he said, watching a herd of gazelle off to the right, “and try to catch her if you want, though I doubt you'll be able to. Botch the job and you won't get paid.”

*“Understood.”*

Sloan ended the call and stretched his arms over his head. After having been up all night destroying the last remains of evidence, he felt totally energized

They were a mile away from the house he'd been living in when it suddenly exploded into a bright ball of flames. The driver and passenger jumped, but Sloan didn't even flinch.

Instead, he merely sat there, smiling to himself. Now it was time to see a warlord about some money.



Eight hours later, the sun was rising in the Eastern Time Zone of the United States. Committed runners jogged along the various paths that cut through the forested park and around the large lake. There was a chill that sunny morning, a promise that fall was on approach.

They met back in the trees, a good hundred meters from the lake. Here they were off the path, out of the open, and with a good view from various directions. If anyone wanted to sneak up on them they'd have quite a time crashing around through the underbrush.

This was the soonest they could meet. Though rendezvousing in a crowded area might have seemed like a considerably better option, for the present this was best. Crowds just meant more faces and potential threats to keep track of. Plus with security precautions as they were, there were cameras everywhere in cities and who knew might be watching.

Cassidy and Steven shook hands as they greeted each other.

"Good to see you still alive," said Cassidy.

"Likewise," nodded Steven, shoving his hands into his pockets and turning his eyes to the lake. "Soon as I heard Sharp and Bennett were dead..."

"I know," said Cassidy quietly. "They went down fast."

Steven shook his head. "Don't believe for a second either were accidents. I talked to both of them the day before they died and they said they felt like they were being followed."

He glanced at her, "Even I spotted a tail day before yesterday."

Stevens pulled out his phone. Every cell in the modern era had a camera, even burner phones. Like seatbelts in vehicles, cameras had long become a standard feature.

He pulled up the photos and handed the phone to Cassidy. She scrolled through them, the screen inches from her face. "Those are government plates...looks like the same agent in each pic."

Steven slowly nodded. "He followed me everywhere for two days until I finally lost him. Never saw any other suspicious car or person, only him, and he never made a move towards me. He was just keeping an eye on me. I called headquarters pretending to be another agent and asked if there was an official tail on Steven Alcom. There wasn't."

*I'da just ghosted him*, zipped a thought through Cassidy's mind. She blinked, *whoa, spy training taking over*.

She apologized for wasting his phone minutes as she texted the photos to herself and then handed the phone back to Steven.

“We’re still awaiting confirmation,” she said, eyeing a jogger on the far side of the lake. “But there’s a very good chance whoever ambushed us in Africa is also behind the deaths of Bennett and Sharp. And if it is who I think it is, Steven, you need to hide as far underground as possible.”

“That bad?”

Cassidy just gave a shake of her head.

The first breeze of the day brushed through the treetops, just beginning to turn, and flicked a couple blades of grass.

A short stretch of silence passed between them before Cassidy took a breath. “We’ve probably been here too long already. I had to see you myself, to make sure...”

“It wasn’t your fault, you know,” said Steven quietly, throwing a sideways look at her. “The ambush, the men we lost...you’re going to catch flak for it, but that’s because the others don’t get it. So don’t listen to ‘em.”

They both flinched into a crouch as a crack echoed through the silence of the morning. Pieces of bark from a large oak to their right flew into the air.

Steven and Cassidy spun and ran east.

“Change of plans,” said Cassidy as they skittered down a short, steep rise. “You’re coming with me.”

A second crack and a second bullet hit another tree, this time off to their left, only a foot away. There was a sniper somewhere behind them and not some amateur who bought a rifle just because it looked cool.

They heard the third shot as it passed between them.

Steven and Cassidy slid to the ground behind a pair of ancient oaks. Panting lightly from rising adrenaline, they cautiously peered back the way they’d come. The trees were too thick, so where was—

“Bridge!” yelled Cassidy, tackling him as a fourth bullet grazed the trunk where Steven’s head had just been.

They scrambled to their feet and cut northeast, heading away from the bridge at the south end of the lake. Flickers of movement behind and to their left made them run faster, foliage crunching under their shoes.

Pausing a second to get their bearings, they watched a flicker of shadows ahead. Whoever was trying to cut them off had the sun behind them.

Steven signaled to Cassidy, who nodded. He veered left and stalked with eerie silence through the trees.

She continued watching a shadow ahead drift closer. After twenty seconds passed, Cassidy started forward again, half-crouched. She slid the knife from her left hip and moved it to her right hand.

Guns weren't necessarily optimal for close quarter fighting, or quiet kills unless one had a suppressor. But knives were excellent for close contact if a person knew how to properly wield one.

The shadow stopped behind a tree on the left. Cassidy crept around it.

A commotion back up the hill drew the assailant's attention and he turned his back to her. That's when she moved. One quick swipe took care of the threat and he never sensed it coming.

A gunshot shattered the quiet.

"Come on, Steven," she muttered, stalking through the trees. "Quit messing around."

Keeping her eyes up, she knelt down and cleaned the blade with a handful of grass and leaves. That was when Steven went sprinting past her, one assailant on his heels with two further behind.

Cassidy sprang into action. Putting the handle of the knife in her teeth, she drew her firearm and lined up a shot in a single smooth action.

The nearest man never even saw her. When he collapsed suddenly, his friend slid to a stop and spun around, gun in hand. He actually looked right past Cassidy but didn't immediately see her. She'd snuck around him and was now approaching with the sun at her back and in his eyes. All he saw against the glaring sunlight was a mystery figure. Then nothing.

Sheathing the knife, Cassidy raced after Steven. She was still running downhill and spotted him and his assailant duking it out. All her money would have been on Steven, except...

"Get out of the open," she growled, pushing her legs faster. She couldn't risk shooting from here because she might hit him.

*Crack!*

The shot cut through the air as she reached the edge of the trees and Steven dropped to the ground. She'd witnessed the death of friends on previous occasions. And like every other time before, Cassidy felt herself go numb as cold, hard training took over.

*Identify the threat...*

She slowed into a crouch and snapped her gun up as she drifted sideways around a tree. The unknown attacker came into view, looking down at Steven's body.

*And neutralize.*

Cassidy double tapped him through the left side of the back and he fell. She took a knee behind a tree and studied Steven's body. There was no movement. It had been a clean shot.

Taking a breath, she stood and picked back up into a run. Digging her phone out, she dialed a number. "Ethan! It's Cassidy!"

Shouts came from behind her, top of the hill. Shouts, but no gunshots.

“Run,” she huffed, cutting through a thicker patch of forest. “Run now. Steven’s dead. Go to the city where we first met and wait to hear from me.”

Still, no one shot at her. As the reality of everything played through her mind, more pieces of the puzzle quickly fell into place. Cassidy’s gut was screaming at her, telling her this was all Sloan. If it wasn’t, why not have more men to ensure both she and Steven would be killed? But like Terret had said, this was a game to Sloan. She knew his style and he was doing exactly what he’d done before: take out everyone who worked closely beside her.

She charged up a steep rise and sprinted down the other side. She punched another number.

*“Now you decide to call,”* said Jason on the third ring. *“Terret got confirmation on that building. Said what was left behind fits Sloan’s profile to a T...”*

“I know it’s Sloan,” she panted lightly. “Shut up and listen!”

More yelling, but further behind her now.

Cassidy powered up the next incline and came to an abrupt halt at the edge of the parking lot. “Steven, one of my men, is dead...there was a team here...they killed him...”

She started for one of the three cars.

*“Where are you?”*

“Spring Creek Park, two hours west of town,” she answered, trying the handles on the first car. All locked so she moved on to the next.

“Don’t count on there being a body because the team will probably dump it someplace else. He said someone from one of the divisions followed him for several days,” she continued, “got pictures of the car and the agent. I’ll send them to you or something.”

*“Let me meet you somewhere.”*

One of the back doors of the second car was unlocked and Cassidy climbed inside. “Sloan probably has eyes on your team,” she replied, crawling into the driver’s seat and sitting down. Whoever drove this vehicle had really long legs. She couldn’t even reach the pedals.

“If you or anyone leaves you’ll likely be followed.”

Phone wedged between her shoulder and ear, she found the wires under the steering column.

*“You mean Sloan would have someone that close to us within the division?”*

The engine turned and whined to life. After adjusting the seat, Cassidy put the car into drive and laid rubber. “Just stay where you are. Work with Terret and try to pick up Sloan’s trail. He experiments at several different locations when he’s planning a major attack, so he’s gearing up for something.”

*“That’s what Terret said,”* replied Jason before sighing. *“Cassidy, let me help.”*

“No,” she answered evenly as she blew through a stop sign. “Keep your distance. Sloan will go after Ethan Jones next, so I’m not in any immediate danger yet, but you and the others would be. If you’re with me and word gets back to him and he knows, or thinks I...you...just stay away, Jason.”

Cassidy hung up in time to slide onto the main road. In between swerving amongst cars, she pulled the battery from her phone. Tossing both into the cup holder she ran a hand over her head.

She didn’t allow herself to dwell on Steven, not at the moment. Right now she had to find a place to ditch the car, get to hers and then hit the road.

It was going to be a long drive.

## Chapter 9

### **Mole Hunt**

“What’d she say?” Kara asked Jason.

“Uh,” he opened his mouth to answer and then stopped. He glanced around the room at the other agents. “Perhaps we should go into the conference room.”

The team exchanged a look but didn’t object. Once inside with the door closed, Jason explained, “Cassidy met with one of her team members, Steven. But it seems there was a team in place or they were followed or something...they, uh, killed him.”

Glancing at the door, Jason lowered his voice. “According to Steven, someone was following him. He took a couple pictures with his phone. Cassidy has them and I’m waiting for her to send them to me. She thinks there’s someone in our division keeping an eye on us. I didn’t want to take any risks, hence why I suggested we come in here.”

“She’s convinced it’s Sloan, then?” asked Logan.

Jason nodded. “She’s positive. She’s going after Ethan Jones, hopefully to get to him before Sloan does.”

“Yeah, because finding Steven turned out so well,” muttered Tony.

“Hey, we’re dealing with a man who makes it a game out of torturing people,” snapped Jason. “He has a long history of it, he’s perfected his technique and he’s very good at it. Cassidy is trying her best to stay a step ahead of him, but she can’t save everyone. So why don’t you try doing something useful for once and get your head outta your—”

“Obviously she doesn’t think it’s safe to come back here,” jumped in Kara.

Jason kept his glare leveled at Tony, who now looked thoroughly scolded.

“Right. If Jones is killed, Cassidy is next on the list,” he replied as he turned his gaze to her. “But that doesn’t mean...”

“He won’t try to capture her before then,” finished Kara with a nod. “Or if she’s here and there is a mole then it would be easy just to hand her over to Sloan.”

“We need to find out who this mole is,” said Logan with the most determination Jason had seen out of him in years.

“Once Cassidy sends me the—”

Jason was interrupted when his phone beeped at him. Pulling it from his pocket he saw he’d received a message and several photos. He opened the pictures first and held the phone back so the others could see.

“That guy looks familiar,” said Kara, absently rubbing her chin.

“I’ll run the license plate,” piped Lee, scribbling it down on a pad from his pocket, “find out which division it calls home.”

He swiftly left the room and went to his desk, and they all glanced out the door as it slowly shut.

Everyone froze. On the far side of the room was the agent in the pictures Cassidy had sent.

“Why don’t we all go say hi,” said Jason, walking briskly out the door.

Kara and Logan shared a look that said “uh oh, here comes the judge!”

When the agent saw Jason approaching, with gaze locked onto him like a heat-seeking missile on its target, he straightened and glanced around nervously. His anxiety didn’t necessarily mean anything. Anyone being approached by a large individual wearing an expression like Jason’s had a right to be nervous.

He slowly stood as Jason came to a stop and towered over him and his desk.

“I don’t think we’ve ever met,” said Jason, extending his hand. “Special Agent Jason Stayton.”

The man hesitated a second before shaking Jason’s hand. “Special Agent Nolan White.”

“You new?”

“Uh, yeah, transferred in from Pennsylvania a couple months ago,” replied Nolan, growing more uncomfortable by the second under the dark expression that had settled on Jason’s face.

Chief Braxton walked into the room. He looked twice when he saw Jason and company around the desk of another agent. He diverted his course and walked over to the group. “I’m not sure now is the time to be making new friends…”

Lee appeared out of nowhere off Jason’s shoulder. “The vehicle belongs to the west division.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” asked Braxton, completely out of the loop.

Jason stepped beside Nolan and slapped a hand on his shoulder. “Have you checked out the conference room, Nolan?”

“Uh, well…”

Under the firm hand of Jason, they walked to the back of the room. Kara fell in beside Braxton and caught him up on what was going on. She reached the part about the car, and when he heard it was from Hensley’s division, he definitely didn’t like the situation.

But that wasn’t the most immediate thing he was interested in at the present; it was one of his agents. Neither Braxton nor any of the others had ever seen Jason act like he was now. There was menace in his eyes and his muscles were wound tight, rigid.



*I knew I should have given him the week off,* thought Braxton. He asked the others to wait outside as he stepped into the conference room with Jason and Nolan.

“You have the pictures?” asked Braxton.

Jason pulled them up on his phone and handed it to him. The chief studied them, then the agent before him. “Well, I’d love to know why you were following a member of an elite team ambushed in Africa.”

Braxton turned the phone so Nolan could see the screen. He was really just a kid, like Tony, and couldn’t have been long out of the academy.

And he had some more work to do before he’d be able to remotely hide his emotions. A sheen of sweat layered his forehead, his breathing was rapid, and he wiped the palms of his hands on his pants.

“It was just something Hensley asked me to do, you know,” stammered the kid. “As an easy assignment. He wanted to make sure no one tried to go after him or anything.”

“That doesn’t make much sense to me,” said Braxton, handing Jason’s phone back to him. “Does that make sense to you?”

“No it doesn’t, boss,” replied Jason, who hadn’t taken his eyes off Nolan. “Steven Alcom was one of the survivors of an ambush, and Hensley sends a single agent, a rookie, to keep an eye on him? You think he’d send an experienced team.”

“That’s all he wanted me to do, seriously!” insisted Nolan, actually beginning to shake a little.

“You know what’s going to happen, Special Agent White,” said Braxton, his own expression growing hard. “Hensley will throw you under the bus because he doesn’t react well to pressure. I don’t know what you two are into, but he’s got twenty years of experience on you, at least. If you don’t end up getting fired, you’ll wind up at a post in the backwoods of Alabama because we will find out. You follow me, son?”

Braxton put his hands on his hips and looked at Jason. “And I’m rather put off he would assign this to an agent in *my* own division...”

His gaze darkened as it slid back to Nolan, “It’s almost like he was paid to spy on us.”

Nolan was terrified now, and beyond words; he couldn’t find any to say.

With a jerk of his thumb, Braxton said, “Back to your desk, agent.”

Nolan was happy to oblige, and he practically ran out of the conference room.

Watching him, Braxton folded his arms, and Jason recognized the look on his boss’s face. “You’re thinking about letting him stay on, see what kind of information he can lead us to while we dig into every communication and contact he’s had?”

“That is what I’m thinking,” replied the chief. “But I am going to enjoy squeezing Hensley later.”

Terret walked through the desks. He quickly sized up the agents standing outside the room, Jason and Braxton, and their body language. “I see I missed some excitement,” he said, stopping in front of them.

“Just working on fixing a leak,” replied Braxton.

Terret instantly caught on. “That explains the rather distraught young man at the far desk.”

“Yup. What’ve you got?”

“After finding the burned-out building in Somalia, agents in the area were keeping an eye out for anything suspicious,” replied Terret.

He glanced behind him to make sure they were the only ones within listening and seeing distance. He opened the folder in his hands to reveal various pictures, aerial and some taken from what appeared inside another structure. Some of the photos were of mostly burned corpses in a very large furnace.

“We found another testing facility,” he said quietly. “We got to it before all the evidence was completely destroyed. For contamination reasons, we haven’t been able to test anything yet, but the pictures say enough. There were also some scraps left from a house near the building, probably where Sloan was living.”

Jason studied the images intently. “This was pretty recent then.”

“Found six hours ago.”

The group shared looks.

“We have the trail of Sloan then,” said Logan.

Terret smiled cautiously. “Agents are on alert, but there’s a lot of barren land and a lot of heavily populated cities on the continent. But we’re listening hard.”

They told him about the death of Steven Alcom to catch him up. Terret let out a long breath, thinking. “Yes, Cassidy will go for Ethan, pardon the obvious. We need to try and track him down ourselves, like yesterday. Sloan will be pulling hard to have him taken out...”

It was obvious by his face that a thought struck him, but he wasn’t ready to share yet.

Jason looked at Braxton. “Cassidy is still my partner, right?”

Braxton eyed him a moment before answering. “Yes...”

“It’s absurd she’s out there by herself doing all this without backup,” Jason’s gaze went to Terret. “I’m going after her.”

“I can’t go with you, but I can help you locate her,” said the spy. “We can track her through Ethan. Find him and we’ll most likely find her.”

Jason looked back at Braxton. Both were aware he was going to go whether or not he was given the official “go ahead”—evidence Cassidy was beginning to wear off on him. But it was a courteous formality to ask for the ‘okay’ from his superior.

Braxton just sighed. This was a big sign that Jason was getting attached; something he'd never had an issue with, especially after his wife and daughter died. But on the same token, if there was anyone who had a shot at protecting Cassidy, it would be Jason.

The chief drew a breath and then gave a nod. "The rest of us will work the internal angle, try and figure out what Sloan's up to besides killing our people. Keep me in the loop, Stayton."

"I'll let you know any developments as they come," said Terret, walking backwards. "We want this guy too."

He turned sharply and jogged to catch up to Jason, already at the door. Chief Braxton put his hands on his hips and heaved an audible sigh. *I'm getting too old for this.*

## Chapter 10

### Strike a Deal

“Everything you asked for is in those little vials in the containers.

“And how can I be certain you delivered? How do I know you didn’t just fill them with water and food coloring?”

Sloan ran the edge of the knife under his fingernail. “If you recall, I invited you out to the lab,” he lifted his gaze to the Sudanese warlord, “but you had some other activities to attend to.”

He pushed himself off one of the containers he was sitting on. “You’ll see the symptoms in three days and in five to six days’ time, your enemies will be quite dead. Besides, what good would it do me if I don’t deliver? Word gets around, no one wants to do business, and there goes my way of life.”

Of course, Sloan had lied to his assistant in Somalia about wanting a longer incubation period. It was just one of those things he did.

Besides, a mastermind never revealed his real intentions to people, especially those he was going to kill after he’d finished using them. Who would seriously work with him if he walked up to someone and said, “I need to borrow your facility for some illegal human testing, and by the way, I’ll be killing you when I’m finished. Thanks.” It was like planning to commit suicide: if you were truly serious about doing it—you didn’t tell anyone.

“And on top of it all,” said Sloan, folding the knife closed, “you know how much I love working here in Africa. I would never dream of crossing you or your group...I’d much rather like to keep my head.”

The tall warlord finally broke into a slow grin. “I like working with you, Mr. Sloan. Your previous client said I would.”

He threw an order over his shoulder. “Come! Bring the man’s money.”

One of the eight or so armed men disappeared to one of the vehicles they’d arrived in.

“You’ll need to get these someplace cool within the next twenty-four hours,” said Sloan, nodding to the metal containers, “and you remember how to deliver the virus *without* infecting yourself?”

“Yes, yes, I remember,” sighed the warlord.

The soldier reappeared with two medium duffels and set them in front of Sloan. He knelt down and did a quick inspection of the contents and stood again.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Nijam,” he said, extending his hand.

“Pleasure is all mine,” grinned the warlord. He turned to his men and gestured for them to load up the containers.

Sloan casually started down the broad, shaded road they were meeting on and pulled out his phone. He didn’t even bat an eye when a burst of rapid fire came from behind him. Twenty seconds later silence returned, except for the warm afternoon breeze playing through the trees.

He turned and moseyed back to where his duffels lay on the ground, beside the containers. The man he’d really come to meet walked down the road towards him. He was tanned, four days unshaven with a stern expression, aviator sunglasses on to hide his brown eyes and an assault rifle in hand.

His three men, also armed, checked the now dead warlord and soldiers. They moved with a distinctive stealth, quick, quiet, efficient. If anyone was to work for this man, perfection was required.

“Morgan Naphtali,” said Sloan, “been a while.”

“Indeed it has,” replied Naphtali, slinging his rifle over his shoulder.

They shook hands before Naphtali stepped to the side and looked at the bodies. Pulling out a cigarette from a crumpled pack, he popped one into his mouth and lit it with a lighter from another pocket.

“Since when did you take up that unhealthy habit?” asked Sloan, watching the men move the bodies off the road.

Naphtali wheezed a laugh. “I have to do something to pass the time and deal with the stress of training new recruits.”

He exhaled a long streak of smoke into the air where it was instantly snatched up by the wind. “So, what was it you wanted to discuss face to face?”

“A mutual interest.”

“And what would that be?”

“Cassidy Jackson.”

Naphtali turned his head and spit on the ground. Whenever he and she had been in the same area, she’d caused him a lot of trouble—and lost business.

Sloan clasped his hands behind his back. “Here’s my proposition for you. I already have a plan in motion to finally be rid of her, but I could use your expertise in a few areas.”

Naphtali took a long pull from the cigarette and then said. “Go on.”

“The biggest part is creating a little...unrest in Europe and the Middle-East, enough to draw the attention of all the US intelligence agencies. But I’m not talking about one-sided terrorism...”

Naphtali studied his occasional business partner a long moment. “You’re talking about attacks and counterattacks by different parties.”

“Hit a mosque, get the Muslims pointing a finger at Israel, then hit a Jewish community, you know. Oh, and be sure to get a Christian neighborhood in there while you’re at it. Topping it off with an attack on an American embassy, and US troop or two ought to do it.”

Naphtali flicked the cigarette into the dirt and crushed it with the toe of his boot. From the beginning, he’d known Sloan was a bit...different. He was heavy into Nazi occult, probably had something to with his heritage. Any opportunity to take out a Jew or Christian turned into a top priority task. He also had this thing for torturing other human beings.

But the latter didn’t bother Naphtali. It had actually worked to his advantage a time or two after he nabbed an employee of a rival and needed him broken and talking. So he sent him to Sloan.

Naphtali also realized there was an outrageously brilliant brain in that head of Sloan’s. He had the mind, and resources, to execute insanely large, and near-impossible, schemes and be successful.

“You’re talking about instigating war,” said Naphtali finally. “That is...very expensive, my friend.”

Sloan just laughed. “Don’t worry about that.”

He gestured to the bodies the men had moved into the thick brush beneath the nearby trees. “Consider their weapons a down payment. I also happen to know they have a large weapons cache in an old grain shed, north edge of al Qadarif. Nijam only has one or two people guarding it at any one time.”

Naphtali broke into a sly little smile. “Working with you has always proved beneficial.”

“Oh, one more thing. I could use your vast list of assassins to track down and kill one of Cassidy’s men. They’ll be in a city, lots of people, and with a small window to take him.”

“Short notice, Sloan,” replied Naphtali, after thinking a minute. “I may know of someone. If your target escapes, there are a handful of people I know who can also track. Best hunters I know. I’ll set things up and contact you.”

“Excellent. You know how to get hold of me.”

One of the men briskly approached and handed Naphtali the keys to the two jeeps Nijam and his men had driven here. He handed one set to Sloan. “So what are you going to do?”

“Well,” answered Sloan, lifting one of the containers and walking to a jeep, “it seems I have two containers of a rather nasty viral strain and no immediate subjects to test them on.”

He returned for the second container, “So I think it’s time for a visit back home.”

“You never intended to give Nijam those containers, did you?” asked Naphtali. Sloan came back a third time and stopped at the duffel bags of money. “Absolutely none. I just needed a little money for the trip back stateside.”

“Give Cassidy my regards,” said Naphtali darkly.

“So I take it we have a deal then?” asked Sloan, stepping over the duffels and crossing to him.

Naphtali extended his hand. “We have a deal.”