



# A Ballad of Blackbirds and Betrayal

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**Category:** Romance, Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** Vengeance burns. Justice demands. Together, they'll bring down an empire.

Eight years after his wife's murder and daughter's near-fatal shooting, Atticus Cameron has built Dynamis Security into a covert force that operates in shadows where even government agencies fear to tread. His singular mission: hunting the powerful senator who ordered the hit that destroyed his family.

Dr. Sabrina Wells, a brilliant trauma surgeon with a military past, stumbles onto a medical mystery when patients display symptoms of an engineered bioweapon. Her investigation puts her in the crosshairs of Senator Warren Mitchell—and directly in Atticus's path. As Mitchell prepares to auction his devastating weapon to international terrorists, Atticus and Sabrina form an uneasy alliance. Their race against time transforms into something neither expected—a connection that challenges them both to move beyond their haunted pasts.

With a deadly bioweapon threatening thousands and corruption reaching the highest levels of government, they'll need more than tactical expertise to survive. In this high-stakes thriller where conspiracy meets chemistry, Atticus and Sabrina discover that some bonds are stronger than the wounds that forged them.

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## Prologue

The day held the particular scorching quality of Texas summer, the heat radiating from the pavement in visible waves that distorted the horizon. Atticus Cameron walked alongside his wife and daughter, his eyes constantly scanning their surroundings—a professional habit he couldn’t quite shake even on his day off. Jane glanced at him, her smile knowing and gently mocking, sunlight catching in her honey-blond hair.

“You’re in security mode again,” she said, squeezing his hand, her skin cool despite the heat. “We’re shopping, not infiltrating hostile territory.”

“Sorry,” he replied, not sorry at all. Vigilance had kept him alive through twenty years of military and covert operations. Old habits. His hand instinctively brushed against the concealed weapon at his hip, the familiar weight reassuring. He never went anywhere unarmed—another habit he wouldn’t apologize for.

Twelve-year-old Anna pointed excitedly across the outdoor shopping center, her dark eyes—so like his own—lighting up with joy. “Mom, look! They have the new ice-cream place open. Can we get some? Please?” Her voice carried the breathless enthusiasm of preadolescence, that fleeting moment before teenagers discovered sullenness.

Atticus studied his daughter as she bounced on her toes, so full of life it seemed to spill from her in waves. Anna was all contrasts—Jane’s delicate features with his stubborn chin, her mother’s grace with his determination. She wore her dark hair in a ponytail that swung when she moved, revealing the tiny birthmark behind her left ear

shaped like a crescent moon. The pink tank top she'd insisted on buying last weekend made her sun-kissed skin glow, and her laugh—God, her laugh—could melt the coldest heart.

“Of course.” Jane laughed. “We’ll meet you at the bench over there,” she told Atticus, nodding toward a seating area near the fountain where water droplets caught the light like scattered diamonds. “I know how much you hate standing in lines.”

“I’ll get the next round,” he said, watching them walk toward the ice-cream shop, memorizing the way Anna tucked herself against Jane’s side, the perfect fit of mother and daughter. He took a position by the bench where he could keep them in view while maintaining sight lines to all approaching traffic, the scent of chlorine from the fountain mingling with the sugary sweetness wafting from the nearby pretzel stand.

Jane and Anna stood at the counter, heads bent together as they examined the flavors, Jane’s arm draped protectively around Anna’s thin shoulders. Three steps. That’s all that separated them—just three steps across the plaza to the ice-cream shop. It shouldn’t have been enough distance to matter.

He spotted the black SUV the instant it turned the corner, the engine’s growl unnaturally loud against the ambient chatter of shoppers. Something about its approach—too fast, too deliberate—triggered the warning bells that had saved his life countless times in combat zones across the globe.

“Jane!” he shouted, already moving, already calculating angles and trajectories, his heart hammering against his ribs. “Get down! Now!”

But those three steps became an impossible gulf as the SUV’s side windows lowered and the muzzle of an assault rifle appeared, sunlight glinting off the metal with terrifying clarity.

The world slowed to crystalline precision, each second stretching into infinity. Atticus drew his weapon in one fluid motion while lunging forward, the rough texture of the pavement scraping against his shoes as he pushed himself faster, knowing with cold certainty he wouldn't make it in time.

The first burst of gunfire cut across the plaza in a deadly arc, the sound reverberating off the surrounding buildings. Jane's body jerked with the impact, her eyes finding his with stunned incomprehension before she crumpled to the ground in a spreading crimson stain that turned the pale concrete almost black where it pooled beneath her.

"Mom!" Anna's scream pierced the air, a sound so raw with terror it would haunt Atticus's dreams for years to come. She dropped to her mother's side, the ice-cream cone she'd been holding shattering against the ground, vanilla melting into red. Atticus finally reached them as the second spray of bullets tore into the storefront behind them, the smell of gunpowder sharp in his nostrils. He returned fire, emptying his magazine toward the vehicle, the recoil of each shot traveling up his arm, but the SUV was already accelerating away, tires squealing against asphalt. He hurled himself over Jane and Anna, covering them with his body as glass shattered and shoppers scattered in panic, their screams creating a nightmarish symphony.

Blood seeped through Atticus's fingers as he desperately applied pressure to Jane's wounds, the warmth of it sickeningly familiar. "Stay with me," he commanded, using the same voice that had driven men through impossible missions. But Jane's eyes had already gone distant, focused on something he couldn't see, the light behind them dimming with each labored breath.

"Daddy," Anna's voice came weakly from beneath him, the soft, breathy quality of it all wrong. "I think I'm hurt."

He shifted to find his daughter's face ashen, blood blooming across her small chest in three distinct spots, the pink of her tank top darkening to burgundy. Three bullets. His

mind cataloged the information with cold calculation even as his heart shattered, the metallic taste of fear flooding his mouth.

He studied Anna's face—those dark lashes against increasingly pale cheeks, the tiny freckles across her nose that only appeared in summer, the way her lips formed around words that were becoming more slurred with each passing second. His little girl. His miracle. The best parts of Jane and himself, combined into one perfect being.

“No,” he whispered, looking between his wife and daughter, paralyzed by the impossible choice of who to help first, the copper scent of blood overwhelming his senses. “Please, God, not both of them. Not my girls?—”

Atticus bolted upright, sheets twisted around him like restraints, damp with night sweat. His heart hammered against his ribs as awareness filtered back. Bedroom. Home. The house that felt empty no matter how many years passed, the silence broken only by the hum of the air-conditioning and his ragged breathing.

Sweat cooled against his skin as his breathing gradually steadied. The digital clock on his nightstand glowed 3:17 a.m. in harsh red numerals that cast an eerie crimson glow across the darkened room. Another night, another replay with perfect, brutal clarity.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, scrubbing his hands over his face, the stubble on his jaw rough against his palms. Jane was still gone. Anna had survived—barely—after six surgeries and a long, painful recovery. Though she'd eventually awakened from her coma and gone on to start college at Georgetown, the Anna who emerged was changed, more fragile, haunted by nightmares that mirrored his own.

His brilliant, fearless girl who once climbed trees and laughed in the face of danger now flinched at sudden noises and sometimes forgot entire conversations mid-sentence. The doctors called it a miracle she'd survived at all. He called it

insufficient. The bullets had stolen parts of her that surgeons couldn't replace—the carefree spirit, the easy trust, the belief that the world was fundamentally safe. Her body had healed; her soul still carried the scars.

Atticus's gaze fell on the framed photograph beside his bed—Jane with Anna on her shoulders, both laughing in the Texas sunlight, their faces alight with joy, the photograph slightly worn at the edges from being handled so often. His fingers traced Jane's face, the cool glass a poor substitute for the warmth of her skin.

Eight years of searching, of following false leads and dead ends. Eight years of unanswered questions. But he was close now. He could feel it, the way he'd always been able to sense when a target was finally within reach, that sixth sense that had kept him alive in environments where others perished.

"I'm going to find them," he whispered to the photograph, to the ghost of the woman who still haunted his dreams. "And I promise you, they're going to pay."

He rose from the bed, the taste of vengeance bitter and familiar on his tongue like strong coffee brewed too long. Sleep wouldn't return tonight. It never did after the nightmare. But that was fine. Revenge, unlike grief, was a patient companion. And after eight years, patience was the one virtue Atticus Cameron had mastered completely.

## Chapter One

The grave marker was simple, elegant white marble—Jane's preference, though she'd never spoken of such things while alive. Women like Jane Cameron didn't waste time contemplating their own mortality. They lived, loved fiercely, and expected to grow old alongside the people who mattered. The Texas sun beat down on the polished stone, making it gleam like alabaster against the emerald grass of Dallas Memorial Gardens.

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Atticus Cameron knelt on one knee, ignoring the morning heat that seemed to rise from the parched ground in visible waves. Eight years to the day. The hot breeze carried the scent of creosote and sun-baked limestone, mingling with the sweet perfume of the blue hydrangeas he placed against the cold stone—Jane’s favorite, the exact shade of her eyes when she’d laughed.

Dallas sprawled around them, a city of glass and ambition, the distant hum of traffic a reminder that life continued relentlessly, regardless of the holes torn in individual hearts. Atticus had once loved this city for the opportunities it offered. Now he merely tolerated it as the place that held Jane’s remains and his most haunting memories.

“We’re getting closer, Jane,” he said, his voice low and steady despite the rage that had seemed to be his constant companion. “I can feel it. The traps are being laid, the net is tightening.”

A cardinal landed on a nearby headstone, its brilliant red plumage a stark contrast to the surrounding stones. Jane had loved cardinals, claimed they were messengers from those who’d passed. Atticus wasn’t a superstitious man—couldn’t afford to be in his line of work—but the timing felt significant nonetheless. He watched the bird tilt its head, studying him with a beady black eye before taking flight into the cloudless blue sky.

“I won’t stop until I know who took you from us,” he promised. “Until they understand exactly what they stole from me...from Anna.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Normally, he’d ignore it here, in this most private of moments, but the special ringtone told him this was the call he’d been waiting

for.Even Jane would understand this interruption.

“What have you got for me?” Atticus spoke without preamble.

“A break,” Cal Cruz answered, excitement vibrating through his usually controlled tone.“Something solid.Something we can use.”

Cal rarely got this animated about leads, maintaining his characteristic focus regardless of the situation.If he was this energized, the lead must be significant.

Atticus rose to his feet, muscles coiled with lethal grace, a testament to the twenty years he’d spent in military and covert operations before founding Dynamis.Sunlight highlighted the silver threading through his dark hair at the temples, the only visible marker of the burden he’d carried these past eight years.His face remained hard edged and handsome, with the kind of weathered strength that made people instinctively step aside when he entered a room.His lips rarely relaxed into anything approaching a smile since the day Jane died.

“I’ll be at headquarters in thirty minutes,” he said, brushing cemetery dust from his tailored charcoal suit.In Dallas, even grief had a dress code.

“Everyone’s already assembling,” Cal replied.“This is it, Atticus.The thread we’ve been looking for.”

He ended the call and touched his fingers to his lips, then to Jane’s name—their private goodbye, a ritual stretching back to their first separation during his early military years, when he’d been deployed to places he wasn’t allowed to name and she’d waited with the steady patience that had defined her.

“I won’t rest until it’s done,” he promised her.“And then maybe—maybe we’ll both find peace.”



The drive to Dynamis headquarters took him through the sprawling Dallas suburbs, past manicured lawns where sprinklers fought a losing battle against the merciless heat, before giving way to the sleek high-rises of the business district. His Audi moved through traffic with the same controlled exactness that characterized its driver, powerful but unobtrusive.

Dallas had transformed in the fifteen years since he'd first arrived. Glass towers reached ever higher into the Texas sky, monuments to commerce and technology. Dynamis occupied the top eight floors of one such building, its mirrored windows reflecting the sun with blinding intensity, designed to look like just another corporate success story. The illusion was deliberate. Anonymity was safety in his business.

The protection began in the underground parking garage, where three separate biometric scanners verified his identity before the reinforced elevator doors slid open. Dynamis Security wasn't just another private military contractor. They were the silent shield between American interests and those who threatened them, moving in shadows where even the CIA feared to tread.

He had built the company from nothing after leaving government service, constructing an organization that operated by his rules, with his standards of excellence. No compromises. No shortcuts. No acceptable losses. He'd lived with one unacceptable loss for eight years; he wouldn't tolerate more.

The elevator ascended smoothly to the fifty-second floor, the subtle weight shift as it decelerated reminding him of the slight pressure before a HALO jump. The doors opened to reveal a reception area designed to project restrained wealth and absolute competence. The walls displayed abstract art in cool blues and grays, selected by Jane when he'd first opened these offices. He'd never had the heart to change them.

Atticus nodded to the security team as he strode through, acknowledging Madison at

reception with a brief inclination of his head. Years of command had ingrained in him the habit of acknowledging the people who kept his operation running, from the newest security guard to his inner circle of elite operatives. They weren't employees; they were extensions of his will, people who had proven themselves through fire and blood.

The main conference room occupied the northwest corner of the building, its floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the Dallas skyline. Five people waited around the glass table, tension vibrating in the air like the moment before a thunderstorm breaks. His team. His family, in every way that mattered after Jane.

Cal Cruz looked up from his laptop, his tattooed fingers never ceasing their dance across the keyboard. At thirty-six, the computer genius known as Cypher in underground hacker circles was still boyishly handsome with an irreverent smile that belied the darkness he'd seen. The tribal designs that snaked up his forearms contrasted with the familiarity of his movements, like an ancient warrior wielding modern weapons.

"The gang's all here, boss," Cal said, tilting his head toward the others, his South Carolina drawl more pronounced than usual. He only slipped back into it when excited or agitated.

Nathan Locke sat with his arm draped casually around his wife, Eden's, shoulders. They made a striking couple—Nate with his surfer looks, blond hair and dark eyes—an unusual combination that drew second glances—and Eden with her exotic beauty, her olive skin and raven-black hair a testament to her Israeli heritage. Together, they were Dynamis's most effective husband-wife field team, lethal and precise. Their marriage had survived the crucible of countless operations, emerging stronger for the shared danger. Atticus had envied them that bond once. Now he merely respected it.

Max Devlin's imposing frame occupied the chair at the far end, his military-short hair and watchful eyes giving him the look of a predator temporarily at rest. Six foot four and built like a linebacker, Max had been with Atticus the longest, following him from government service into the private sector without hesitation. Beside him stood his wife, Jade. Standing at five ten, with her pixie-short hair and striking green eyes set against skin the color of burnished copper, she had the kind of beauty that stopped conversations when she entered a room. Dynamis's top sniper and tactical specialist, she could hit a target from a mile away and had more confirmed kills than the rest of them combined. Her face remained placid, only the slight narrowing of her eyes betraying her anticipation.

"Show me what we've got," Atticus said without preamble, taking his seat at the head of the table. Coffee waited for him in a porcelain mug—black, no sugar—just as he preferred. Small courtesies, big loyalties. That was the Dynamis way.

Cal tapped a key, and the wall screen came to life with photographs, financial records, and a complex diagram of connections that resembled a spider's web more than a traditional organizational chart. The lights dimmed automatically, casting everyone's faces in the blue glow of the screen.

"For eight years, we've been looking at this from the wrong angle," Cal said, highlighting a section of the diagram with a laser pointer that cut through the artificial gloom like a sniper's targeting laser. "We've been focusing on who pulled the trigger, not who gave the order."

Atticus leaned forward, resting his forearms on the polished table surface. The room fell into a deeper silence, the kind that preceded life-changing revelations. Even the usual hum of the building's systems seemed muted, as if the structure itself was holding its breath.

"The shooters were hired muscle," Jade added. "Contracted through a shell company

based in the Caymans.They were killed in a police raid forty-eight hours after Jane's murder."

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“Dead ends by design,” Max continued. “But money always leaves a trail, no matter how well it’s hidden. We’ve been tracking wire transfers for months, building a pattern.”

Eden leaned forward, tapping a document on the screen. Her movements were fluid, elegant. “We traced a series of offshore transfers that originated from what appeared to be a legitimate defense contractor lobbying fund.”

“Appears is the key word.” Nate picked up the thread, his hand remaining lightly on Eden’s shoulder, a silent connection between them. “The fund was used to disguise payments to at least three known assassins over a five-year period. One of those payments happened two days before Jane was killed.”

Atticus listened, absorbing the information like parched soil takes water, his mind already connecting implications, considering contingencies. His team worked in seamless concert, each picking up where another left off, no wasted words or repetition. This was why they were the best—not just individual excellence, but collective meticulousness.

“I’ve spent the last month unraveling the encryption on these accounts,” Cal said, bringing up a new screen of complex financial data, columns of numbers and coded entries that would be meaningless to most observers. “It took breaking through eleven layers of security and tracking ghost transfers through twenty-seven different banks, but I finally found the source.”

Cal paused, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, a rare hesitation from a man who typically moved at the speed of thought. “Atticus, you need to prepare yourself for

this.”

“I’ve been preparing for eight years,” Atticus replied, his voice calm despite the sudden acceleration of his pulse. “Show me.”

The screen changed again, displaying a photograph that made Atticus’s blood run cold. Senator Warren Mitchell smiled from the image, shaking hands with a military contractor at a fundraising event. The date stamp showed it was taken just one week before Jane’s murder.

Mitchell—distinguished, silver haired, with the confident smile of a man accustomed to power. The very picture of American political success, with his perfect family and his impeccable credentials. The man who’d made his reputation championing increased military funding and enhanced national security.

“Mitchell?” Atticus’s voice was dangerously quiet, the kind of quiet that preceded avalanches.

“Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee,” Cal confirmed, his expression grim. “And the man who’s been financing a series of black-market weapons deals for the past decade.”

“The same deals you were investigating eight years ago,” Max added, his voice grave. “Before the hit.”

Atticus stared at Mitchell’s face, memories flooding back in a torrent he couldn’t stop. The senator at Jane’s funeral, clasping his hand, offering personal condolences and promises of justice. The man who’d stood beside Atticus at Anna’s hospital bed, assuring him that no expense would be spared in her care. The same man who had appointed Atticus to the task force investigating arms dealers supplying terrorist cells in Afghanistan. The man who’d had access to every detail of Atticus’s findings.

The betrayal cut deeper for its familiarity. Mitchell had been more than a political connection—he'd been a mentor, someone Atticus had respected and trusted.

“You were getting too close,” Jade said softly, watching Atticus with the careful assessment of someone who knew exactly how dangerous he could be. “He eliminated the threat.”

A muscle ticced in Atticus's jaw, the only visible sign of the tsunami of rage building within him. When he spoke, his voice was perfectly controlled, all emotion locked behind the steel doors of his discipline.

“Show me everything.”

For the next twenty minutes, his team laid out the evidence—meticulously gathered, cross-referenced, verified. Mitchell's connections to black-market arms dealers in Eastern Europe. His financial ties to research facilities developing experimental bioweapons. The systematic elimination of anyone who began asking questions too persistently.

The cold stillness settled over Atticus—the combat mindset that had served him through three tours of duty and countless black ops. His breathing remained measured, his heartbeat steady. Emotion was a luxury he'd indulge later, in private. Now was the time for strategy, for planning the dismantling of Warren Mitchell's empire piece by painful piece.

“What's his security like now?” he asked, his mind already calculating angles of approach, vulnerabilities, pressure points.

“Two private bodyguards, ex-Secret Service,” Nate said, pulling up personnel files. “Thomas Reeves and Marcus Dawson. Both capable, but neither exceptional. Plus a driver who's former Special Forces—Eric Martinez. More dangerous than the other

two combined.”

“I’m more concerned about this,” Cal interrupted, bringing up a new file on-screen. “Dr. Sabrina Wells. Trauma surgeon at Dallas Memorial Hospital. She’s been making inquiries about Mitchell’s business connections to several pharmaceutical research companies.”

A photograph appeared—a woman in her late thirties with intelligent amber eyes and an air of no-nonsense competence about her. Her dark hair was pulled back from a face that was more striking than conventionally beautiful, with high cheekbones and a determined set to her jaw. Nothing in her appearance suggested someone who would deliberately walk into danger, yet the set of her mouth spoke of stubborn persistence.

“Why is she looking into Mitchell?” Atticus asked, studying the woman’s face.

“She’s treated multiple patients with unusual symptoms consistent with exposure to an experimental bioweapon,” Cal explained, bringing up medical reports with sections highlighted. “Four patients in the past three months, all with identical symptoms—hemorrhaging, neurological damage, rapid organ failure. Her research led her to a black-market lab bankrolled through one of Mitchell’s shell companies.”

Eden leaned forward, her brow furrowed. “She’s been requesting information using hospital research protocols, but she’s hitting dead ends. Recently, she’s started reaching out to contacts at the CDC and NIH.”

“She’s civilian,” Jade noted, her tactical mind already identifying complications. “And she’s asking dangerous questions in dangerous places. If Mitchell follows his usual pattern, she’s already on his elimination list.”

Atticus studied the woman’s photograph, noting the intensity in her eyes, the stubborn set of her jaw. “Mitchell will eliminate her if she gets too close to the



truth. We need to know what she knows before that happens.”

“I’ve already got tickets for you to attend a fundraiser at Dallas Memorial tomorrow night,” Cal said with a self-satisfied smirk. “Dr. Sabrina Wells is on the organizing committee. Seems she’s passionate about trauma care for underprivileged communities. The event is a charity auction to fund a new emergency care wing.”

The corner of Atticus’s mouth lifted slightly—not quite a smile, but the closest approximation he allowed himself these days. “Convenient.”

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“I thought so,” Cal replied, his grin widening. “Your donation of half a million dollars has secured you a prime table and significant face time with key hospital staff.”

Atticus nodded, his mind already calculating angles and approaches. A public venue would limit Mitchell’s options if he was already tracking the doctor. “Good. I’ll make contact, assess her knowledge.”

“And then?” Eden asked, the question hanging in the air like smoke after gunfire.

Atticus looked at each member of his team in turn, these people who had become his family in the aftermath of devastation. They’d followed him into hell more times than he could count. Now he was asking them to follow him into something potentially more dangerous—a personal vendetta against one of the most powerful men in Washington. A man with connections throughout the government, with resources that dwarfed their own, with the ability to destroy them all with a single phone call.

He didn’t need to ask if they were with him. The question would have been an insult to their loyalty.

“And then we begin dismantling Senator Mitchell’s life piece by piece,” Atticus said, his voice carrying the quiet certainty of absolute conviction. “Until he understands exactly what he took from me. From us.”

No one spoke for a long moment. Then Max leaned forward, his massive hands flat on the table, the simple gold band on his left hand catching the light.

“For Jane,” he said simply.

The others nodded, a silent pact renewed.

“For Jane,” Atticus agreed, the ghost of his wife’s smile flashing in his memory. “And for Anna.”

He turned back to the screen, to the photograph of Senator Warren Mitchell smiling at some political function, completely unaware that the countdown to his destruction had officially begun. In that moment, with absolute clarity, Atticus knew he wouldn’t rest until Mitchell had paid for Jane’s death in full measure.

Some debts could only be settled in blood.

“Let’s get to work.”

## Chapter Two

Sabrina Wells had spent her entire adult life learning to coexist with chaos. As a trauma surgeon, she thrived in the liminal space between order and disaster. Blood and bone, muscle and sinew—the human body was a marvel of engineering, and when it broke, she was the architect who rebuilt it.

Tonight, however, chaos had traded its surgical scrubs for a cocktail dress.

The hospital’s annual charity gala transformed Dallas Memorial’s normally austere grand lobby into a glittering fantasy of crystal chandeliers and ice sculptures. Wealthy donors circulated through the space like exotic fish in an aquarium—the women draped in designer gowns and heirloom jewels, the men in tuxedos tailored to disguise expanding waistlines. The air smelled of expensive perfume, champagne, and money—lots of money.

Sabrina smoothed a hand down the midnight blue silk of her dress, a rare indulgence

for a woman who lived in scrubs and sensible shoes. The dress hugged curves she typically concealed beneath lab coats, dipping low in the back to reveal more skin than she'd shown in years. At thirty-eight, Sabrina had dedicated herself to medicine with single-minded focus, leaving little room for serious relationships, much less marriage—a choice she rarely regretted, except on particularly lonely nights. She kept herself fit, but still felt exposed, vulnerable in a way that had nothing to do with the dress and everything to do with the suspicions that had consumed her for the past three months.

“You’re working too hard.” Chief of Surgery Richard Maitland appeared at her elbow, champagne flute in hand. “This is a party, Sabrina. You’re allowed to enjoy it.”

“I’m enjoying it,” she protested, touching the stem of her own barely sipped champagne. “I’ve smiled at so many potential donors my face hurts.”

“Yet you keep scanning the room like you’re expecting trouble.” Richard’s astute gaze missed nothing, a useful trait in a surgeon but occasionally irritating in a friend. “What’s going on with you? You’ve been on edge for weeks.”

Sabrina considered her answer carefully. Richard was her mentor and advocate, but even he would think she’d lost her mind if she shared her suspicions—that a US senator was funding illegal bioweapon research, that four patients who’d died in her ER had been victims of experimental testing, that the CDC and NIH had been unusually silent about her inquiries.

“Just professional paranoia,” she said lightly. “I’m waiting for my phone to buzz with an emergency alert. You know how it is—the minute I relax, we’ll get a multicar pileup.”

Richard nodded, accepting her explanation. “At least try to enjoy yourself until then. You’ve worked hard on this event, and it’s a triumph. The new trauma wing is

almost fully funded.”

He took a sip of his champagne before adding, “Oh, and the board was impressed with your work on the joint oversight committee. Three new clinical trials approved, and you managed to get additional safety protocols added without the pharmaceutical companies throwing a fit. Not many trauma surgeons have your eye for research applications.”

Sabrina gave a modest shrug, though the acknowledgment pleased her. Her dual role as surgeon and committee member had been controversial when she’d first pushed for the position three years ago.

“Someone needs to bridge the gap between the researchers and the clinicians,” she said. “Most of our patients aren’t textbook cases that fit neatly into clinical trial parameters.”

“Which is precisely why you’re valuable on the committee. You see the potential risks before they materialize.” Richard glanced across the room at an approaching donor. “Speaking of which, Mrs. Harrington is headed this way. I’d better intercept her before she corners you about naming the pediatric wing after her late husband again.”

“Go,” Sabrina urged, grateful for the reprieve. “I’ll make the rounds to the east wing donors.”

She made her way to the edge of the room, finding momentary sanctuary beside a towering ice sculpture of the hospital’s logo. The chill emanating from it cooled her flushed skin, providing welcome relief from the press of bodies.

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It was then she noticed him.

He stood across the room in conversation with the hospital board president, but his dark gaze found hers over the man's shoulder, as if he'd been tracking her movements all evening. Tall and broad shouldered, he filled out his tuxedo with the kind of muscular authority that suggested military training, not desk jobs and country clubs. Silver threaded his dark hair at the temples, and the lines around his eyes spoke of experience rather than age. His face was handsome in a hard, uncompromising way—all angles and planes like something carved from granite.

Atticus Cameron. CEO of Dynamis Security, the multibillion-dollar global private security firm whose elite contractors protected everything from heads of state to oil pipelines in conflict zones. Even those outside security circles recognized the Dynamis name—they were the invisible guardians of the wealthy and powerful, the company governments called when situations required expertise beyond conventional military solutions. Their half-million-dollar donation had created quite a stir among the organizing committee.

Their gazes locked across the room, and something electric passed between them—recognition, though they'd never met, an awareness that defied logic or explanation. Sabrina felt her pulse accelerate, her body's instinctive response to a perceived threat.

Because that's what he was, she realized. Dangerous in a way that went beyond physical.

The board president followed the direction of Cameron's gaze, spotted Sabrina, and

waved her over. Caught, she had no choice but to cross the room toward them, aware of Cameron's eyes tracking her approach with the focused intensity of a predator.

"Dr. Wells!" The board president beamed. "I've been singing your praises to Mr. Cameron. He's made quite a generous donation specifically for your trauma care initiatives."

"That's very kind," Sabrina said, extending her hand. "We appreciate your support, Mr. Cameron."

His hand engulfed hers, warm and calloused—not the manicured hand of someone who spent his days behind a desk. "The pleasure is mine, Dr. Wells. I've been following your work with great interest."

His voice was a smooth baritone, the cadence measured and controlled. But it was his eyes that held her—dark, intelligent, and watchful. Too watchful.

Alarm bells chimed in Sabrina's mind. No one "followed her work with great interest" unless they were trauma specialists or medical students. Certainly not private security contractors with no apparent connection to the medical field. The pressure of his hand on hers lingered just a fraction too long before releasing, the contact sending an unwelcome shiver up her spine.

"How flattering," she said, keeping her tone light. "Though I'm afraid my research papers aren't exactly bestsellers outside medical circles."

"Your recent research into anomalous trauma presentations is particularly fascinating," Cameron said, his expression revealing nothing. "Especially those cases that resemble radiation poisoning but don't respond to standard treatments."

The board president, clearly lost in this turn of conversation, excused himself to greet

other donors, leaving Sabrina alone with Cameron. The noise of the gala faded to a dull roar in her ears as she processed his words.

He knew. Somehow, he knew exactly what she'd been investigating.

"You seem remarkably well informed about my research interests, Mr. Cameron," she said, keeping her voice steady despite the adrenaline now coursing through her system. "Most people's eyes glaze over when I mention anything more technical than Grey's Anatomy."

"I'm not most people." His mouth curved into something approximating a smile, though it never reached his eyes. "And neither are you, Dr. Wells. Perhaps we could find somewhere quieter to discuss your findings?"

Sabrina weighed her options. He knew something—perhaps even something that could help her make sense of what was happening. But meeting privately with a stranger who seemed to know too much about her work triggered every self-preservation instinct she possessed.

"I appreciate your interest, Mr. Cameron, but tonight is about raising funds, not discussing medical minutiae," she demurred. "Perhaps you could call my office next week to schedule a proper meeting."

A meeting she had no intention of keeping.

"Senator Mitchell's name ever come up in your research?" Cameron asked, his voice so low she almost missed it over the orchestra's crescendo.

Sabrina froze, her champagne flute halfway to her lips. Her eyes darted to his face, searching for some indication of his intent.



“Why would a senator’s name appear in my medical research?” she asked carefully.

“Because we both know it isn’t just medical research.” His eyes held hers, unflinching. “Four patients in three months, all with identical symptoms. All with connections, however tenuous, to BioGenix Laboratories. Which, coincidentally, receives substantial funding through a foundation chaired by Senator Mitchell’s wife.”

The crystal stem of the champagne flute felt suddenly fragile in Sabrina’s grip. No one knew about those connections. She’d been meticulously careful, using her home computer rather than hospital networks, making inquiries through former colleagues rather than official channels.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“Someone who wants the same thing you do,” he answered. “The truth.”

Before she could respond, a commotion near the entrance drew their attention. A group of new arrivals was creating a stir—photographers’ flashes punctuating the ambient lighting as the crowd parted.

Senator Warren Mitchell had arrived, his silver hair gleaming under the chandelier lights, his wife elegant in crimson at his side. Sabrina had never met the senator in person, though his image was familiar enough from news coverage. Tall and distinguished, with the confident bearing of someone accustomed to wielding power, Mitchell moved through the crowd like royalty accepting tribute, smiling and shaking hands as he progressed.

Beside her, Atticus Cameron went utterly still. Had she not been standing so close, she might have missed the subtle shift in his demeanor—the slight tensing of his jaw, the almost imperceptible narrowing of his eyes. But standing where she was, Sabrina felt

the change like a drop in atmospheric pressure before a storm.

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Pure, undiluted hatred radiated from him in waves, though his expression remained impassive. It lasted only seconds before he mastered it, but it was enough to send a chill down Sabrina's spine.

"Mr. Cameron—" she began.

"We need to talk," he said, his voice tightly controlled. "Not here."

Mitchell was making his way deeper into the room, greeting hospital board members with practiced charm. He hadn't noticed them yet, but would soon if they remained where they were.

As if sensing her hesitation, Cameron leaned closer. "You've been asking dangerous questions, Dr. Wells. The kind that get people killed. I can help you find answers, but not if you're dead."

The directness of his statement should have seemed melodramatic, but something in his eyes—something cold and knowing—told Sabrina he wasn't exaggerating.

"The east terrace," she said, making a decision. "Five minutes."

He nodded almost imperceptibly and turned away, moving smoothly through the crowd in the opposite direction from Mitchell. Sabrina watched him go, wondering if she'd just made a terrible mistake.

She circulated for exactly four minutes, making brief, meaningless conversation with donors while her mind raced through possibilities. Cameron knew things he shouldn't

know—about her research, about the connections she'd painstakingly uncovered. Either he was part of what she was investigating, or he was conducting his own parallel inquiry. Neither option was particularly reassuring.

Excusing herself, she slipped through the French doors onto the east terrace. The night air hit her like a blessing after the stifling heat of the crowded ballroom, the sounds of the gala muffled by thick glass. Dallas sprawled below, a tapestry of lights against the velvet darkness.

"Careful." Cameron's voice came from the shadows to her right. "Stay where you can be seen from inside. Mitchell has men watching you."

Sabrina fought the instinct to turn toward his voice, instead moving to the stone balustrade as if admiring the view. "You seem to know a lot about Senator Mitchell."

"More than most." He moved to stand beside her, maintaining a proper distance that would appear conversational to anyone observing from inside. "And not nearly enough."

"Why are you here, Mr. Cameron? What's your interest in my research?"

"Mitchell is conducting illegal bioweapon research through BioGenix," he said without preamble. "Your patients were collateral damage—lab workers exposed during testing. The symptoms you documented match a weaponized toxin designed to mimic a hemorrhagic fever but leave no trace in conventional toxicology screens."

Sabrina's breath caught. It was the confirmation she'd been seeking for months, delivered matter-of-factly by a stranger at a charity gala.

"How do you know this?" she demanded.

“Because my team has been tracking Mitchell’s operations for years,” he said. “We have the financial trails, communication intercepts, shell company structures. What we didn’t have until recently was proof of the bioweapon’s existence. Your patients provided that proof.”

“And what does your team plan to do with this information?” She kept her voice steady, professional, though her heart hammered against her ribs.

“Stop him. Before he can sell the weapon to the highest bidder.” Cameron’s hands rested on the balustrade, his knuckles white with suppressed tension. “But we need your expertise to understand exactly what we’re dealing with.”

Sabrina laughed, a short, sharp sound without humor. “My expertise? I’m a trauma surgeon, not a bioweapons specialist. I’ve been stumbling around in the dark for months trying to make sense of what I was seeing.”

“You’re the only person who’s treated victims of this weapon and documented the progression,” he countered. “That makes you the world’s foremost expert, whether you want the title or not.”

She shook her head, processing the implications. “Even if what you’re saying is true, why would I trust you? I don’t know you. I don’t know what Dynamis Security really does. For all I know, you’re competing for the same bioweapon.”

“A fair point,” he acknowledged. “But consider this—if I wanted to silence you, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

The matter-of-fact statement sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with the night air.

“Is that supposed to reassure me?”

“No. But this might.” He reached slowly into his jacket, telegraphing the movement to avoid alarming her, and withdrew an encrypted thumb drive. “Everything we have on Mitchell and BioGenix. Take it, verify it independently. When you’re ready to talk, call the number encoded in the files.”

She hesitated, then took the drive, concealing it in her clutch purse.

“Why are you really doing this, Mr. Cameron? Private security contractors don’t typically crusade against corrupt politicians unless there’s profit involved.”

Something flashed in his eyes—a glimpse of raw emotion quickly suppressed. “Let’s just say Mitchell and I have unfinished business.”

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Before she could press further, the French doors opened, spilling light and noise onto the terrace. A young woman in hospital administration uniform stepped out.

“Dr. Wells? You’re needed inside. The auction is about to begin.”

“Thank you, I’ll be right there,” Sabrina replied, grateful that the shadows concealed her face until she could compose her expression. She turned back to Atticus. “I should go.”

He nodded. “Be careful, Dr. Wells. Mitchell doesn’t leave loose ends.”

“What about you?” she asked, suddenly concerned about being seen with him.

“I’ll make my exit another way.” His mouth quirked in what might have been a genuine smile. “Not my first covert departure.”

Something told her that was true. As she turned to go, his hand caught hers briefly.

“Sabrina,” he said, using her first name for the first time, his voice dropping to a register that seemed to resonate directly with her nervous system. “Trust your instincts. They’ve kept you alive this long.”

Then he was gone, melting into the darkness at the edge of the terrace with a silence that should have been impossible for a man his size.

Sabrina stepped back into the gala, the thumb drive a heavy presence in her purse, Cameron’s warning echoing in her mind. Across the room, Senator Mitchell was

laughing at something Richard Maitland had said, the picture of genial charm and respectability.

Their eyes met for the briefest moment, and Mitchell nodded politely in her direction, his politician's smile never wavering. Yet something in that gaze—a coldness, a calculation—made her skin crawl.

Trust your instincts, Cameron had said.

Her instincts were screaming.

### Chapter Three

Dynamis Security's headquarters rose like a gleaming fortress against the Dallas skyline. Sabrina approached the entrance, each measured step at odds with her racing pulse. The thumb drive Atticus had given her last night weighed in her purse like a live grenade.

She'd spent until dawn reviewing its contents. Her medical training had allowed clinical detachment while analyzing the data, but the human part of her had recoiled at the implications. The evidence confirmed her worst suspicions: Mitchell wasn't merely funding illegal research—he was orchestrating the development of a bioweapon with potential casualties rivaling the 1918 influenza pandemic.

The security screening rivaled anything she'd experienced at military installations. Biometric scanners, retinal verification, and guards who assessed her with the calculating precision of professionals who quantified threat levels as automatically as breathing. Sabrina met their scrutiny with the composure she'd perfected in emergency rooms where split-second decisions determined who lived and died.



She'd dressed strategically—a charcoal pantsuit over a burnished copper blouse, her dark hair secured at her nape, makeup minimal but deliberate. The professional armor of a woman who understood how easily men in power underestimated her.

Atticus waited in the lobby, his dark suit emphasizing broad shoulders and lean strength. The space seemed to reorganize itself around him, his quiet authority drawing glances from everyone nearby—including her own.

“Dr. Wells.” His voice carried that controlled power she'd recognized instantly at the gala. “Thank you for coming.”

“Your evidence was compelling,” she replied, extending her hand.

His grip was warm, firm, calloused in ways that contradicted his executive appearance. When their eyes met, that strange current passed between them again—a recognition that made her uncomfortably aware of him as something more than a temporary ally.

“You reviewed everything?” he asked, guiding her toward the elevator, his touch light at her elbow.

“Every file,” she confirmed as the doors closed, suddenly conscious of the confined space. “I assume your team has vetted me thoroughly enough to know I have clearance for this conversation.”

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “Former Navy lieutenant, medical division. Honorable discharge after six years, including two deployments to conflict zones. Top of your class at Johns Hopkins. Board certified in trauma surgery with specializations in emergency medicine and disaster response.” He met her gaze directly. “Yes, Dr. Wells, we've vetted you.”

She felt a flicker of irritation at his thorough knowledge of her history. “And you neglected to mention this connection when we met last night because...?”

“Professional habit.” The elevator glided to a stop at the top floor. “I never reveal more information than necessary until I’ve confirmed alignment of interests.”

“And have you?” she asked, stepping into a sleek corridor. “Confirmed our alignment?”

His dark eyes assessed her with that unnerving intensity. “That’s what today is about.”

The conference room occupied the northwest corner of the building, floor-to-ceiling windows framing the Dallas skyline. Five people waited around a glass table—Dynamis Security’s inner circle. Their conversation ceased as she entered, their eyes carrying the silent evaluation of people accustomed to calculating threats.

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She recognized the assessment—the same one she performed in trauma units during those critical first seconds. They were gauging her worth, her potential danger, her usefulness. Sabrina straightened her spine and met their scrutiny, unflinching.

“Introductions are in order,” Atticus said. “We use code names during operations—call signs. An old black-ops habit that’s proven effective in the field.”

He nodded toward a man with agile fingers and watchful eyes. “Calvin Cruz, our tech specialist. Known as Cypher when we’re operational.”

Cal flashed a grin that lightened his intense focus, his fingers tapping an unknown rhythm on the table.

“Nathan and Eden Locke,” Atticus continued, indicating a couple whose physical proximity betrayed their connection. “Warlock and Nightshade in the field.”

Nate offered a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Eden merely nodded, her exotic features revealing nothing.

“Max and Jade Devlin.” The final couple presented a study in contrasts—he massive with military-short hair, she all lean elegance with a knife dancing between her fingers. “Viper and Frost, respectively.”

“Don’t mind the knife,” Max said, catching Sabrina’s glance. “Stress reliever. Like those squeeze balls, but with the added benefit of keeping skills sharp.”

“And I’m Reaper,” Atticus concluded. “When the mission’s live, those are the only

names we use. It helps us compartmentalize—separate the operative from the person. And it keeps our real names off the channels in case someone intercepts the frequencies.”

She glanced around the table. “You said an old black-ops habit. You all served together before Dynamis?”

“Some of us did,” Atticus replied. “Nate, Max and Jade served under my command in a specialized unit. Cal worked for an alphabet agency and was too skilled for them to know what to do with him.”

Something in the way they exchanged glances spoke of shared history deeper than professional connection—missions too classified to mention, dangers survived together that forged bonds stronger than friendship.

Atticus pulled out a chair for Sabrina at the head of the table, opposite his own position. The symbolism wasn’t lost on her—an equal in this gathering of predators. She set her briefcase on the polished surface and met his gaze across the glass.

“My time is limited,” she said. “So perhaps we could get to the point of this meeting?”

Cal’s unexpected laugh broke the tension. “I like her already.”

“The point, Dr. Wells,” Atticus said, settling into his chair with controlled grace, “is determining what each of us brings to the table, and how we can work together to stop Mitchell before he weaponizes this technology further.”

“What I bring is medical expertise and documentation of four victims,” Sabrina replied, opening her briefcase and placing a sealed file on the table. “What I need is to understand why a private security firm with government contracts is pursuing a

sitting US senator instead of taking this evidence to federal authorities.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Jade’s knife stilled between her fingers.

“We have our reasons,” Eden said carefully, exchanging a glance with Atticus.

“I’m sure you do,” Sabrina countered. “And if we’re going to work together, I need to know what they are. I’m not risking my career and possibly my life on a corporate vendetta or a power play.”

Silence stretched between them as Sabrina held Atticus’s gaze without wavering. Something dangerous flickered in his eyes—not directed at her, but at whatever demons drove him. The others watched with the stillness of operators accustomed to reading currents of power.

“Senator Mitchell orchestrated the murder of my wife eight years ago,” Atticus finally said, each word precisely controlled. “He had her killed and my daughter shot because I was getting too close to his weapons-dealing operation. The official investigation concluded it was a random act of violence. It wasn’t.”

The clinical detachment Sabrina had maintained began to fracture. The pieces aligned—his controlled rage at the gala, his personal pursuit of evidence against Mitchell, the loyalty of his team that surpassed professional commitment.

“I’m sorry,” she said simply, knowing no other words could suffice.

“We don’t want your sympathy, Dr. Wells,” Max said, his deep voice rumbling across the table. “We want your expertise.”

“And you have it,” she replied without hesitation. “But understand that my priority is stopping this bioweapon from being deployed. Justice for your wife is your

motivation—saving lives is mine.”

Atticus nodded once, a gesture of acknowledgment and respect. “Then let’s get to work.”

For the next forty-five minutes, Sabrina presented everything she’d discovered. Her delivery carried the measured particulars of countless medical presentations. She explained how four patients had arrived at her emergency department over three months, each presenting with symptoms that defied diagnosis—hemorrhaging, neurological damage, rapid organ failure that progressed despite intervention.

“All four had connections to BioGenix Laboratories,” she said, bringing up medical charts on the screen Cal had prepared. “A delivery driver who transported materials to their facility. A janitor who worked in their research wing. A lab technician from a subcontracting company. And finally, a graduate student who briefly interned in their quality control department.”

“None important enough to raise suspicions if they died,” Eden observed, studying the data with narrowed eyes.

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“But all with just enough exposure to become collateral damage,” Jade added.

“Exactly.” Sabrina pulled up detailed microscopy images. “What caught my attention wasn’t just the unusual symptoms, but the pattern of organ failure. It wasn’t consistent with any known pathogen, yet followed a precise progression that suggested deliberate engineering. The cellular destruction shows markers of a designer toxin targeting specific protein receptors found primarily in neurological and cardiovascular tissues.”

Sabrina paused, weighing how much to reveal. “Three weeks ago, after the second victim, I contacted Dr. Elaine Cho at BioGenix.” She traced the edge of her tablet with one finger. “We’d collaborated briefly at a research symposium on trauma response to chemical agents. Given the symptom presentation and the victims’ connections to BioGenix, I thought she might offer insights.”

“And?” Cal prompted, leaning forward.

“Her response was telling. Initially helpful, requesting detailed lab reports. Then—nothing. Radio silence.” Sabrina’s expression hardened. “When I followed up, she suddenly cited patient confidentiality protocols. For a research scientist with no direct patient contact to invoke HIPAA restrictions was more than unusual. A week later, the third victim arrived in my ER.”

“She was warned off,” Eden observed.

“Precisely. The next day, I received a formal cease and desist letter from BioGenix legal, threatening action against my medical license for harassment of their

staff.” Sabrina pulled up the microscopy images again. “That’s when I knew. No one responds that aggressively to a standard medical consultation unless they’re hiding something catastrophic.”

She turned back to the scientific evidence. “Whatever they’re developing at BioGenix, it’s unlike anything I’ve encountered. The precise tissue targeting is...remarkable, in the most horrifying way possible.”

Cal whistled softly. “They’ve engineered something that can target specific tissues while leaving others intact?”

“That’s my assessment,” Sabrina confirmed. “Which makes it ideal for weaponization. It could be calibrated to cause maximum casualties or chronic disability without destroying infrastructure or creating environmental contamination.”

“The perfect weapon,” Nate said grimly. “Devastating but contained.”

“And nearly impossible to trace back to its source,” Sabrina added. “Without specialized testing that most hospitals lack, it would present as an unusual but not immediately suspicious cluster of deaths. By the time anyone connected the patterns, the damage would be done.”

Atticus had remained silent during her presentation, watching her with that unsettling intensity. Now he leaned forward, fingers steepled. “Your professional assessment of BioGenix’s progress?”

“They’ve moved beyond theoretical research to practical application,” she said without hesitation. “These deaths weren’t just accidents—they were field tests. Observing how the toxin affects different demographics, exposure levels, and progression timelines. They’re fine-tuning it.”



“For deployment,” Max concluded.

“Or sale to the highest bidder,” Cal added. “Mitchell’s financial records show increased communication with several international contacts known for arms dealing.”

Atticus nodded, absorbing this information with measured calculation. “We need to infiltrate BioGenix, access their research directly, and destroy their samples before they can be weaponized further.”

“And we need to develop a treatment protocol,” Sabrina insisted. “Something that can be rapidly deployed if they’ve already distributed samples.”

“Both will require someone with medical expertise on the inside,” Eden said, her gaze settling on Sabrina with speculative assessment.

“I’m a trauma surgeon, not a spy,” Sabrina said. “I’d compromise your operation before I took two steps into BioGenix.”

“Not necessarily,” Atticus countered. “Your medical credentials would give you legitimate access and reason to ask questions that would seem suspicious coming from anyone else.”

“And we’d provide the necessary training and backup,” Nate added.

Sabrina looked around the table at these people who moved in shadows she’d never navigated, who dealt in violence and secrets as comfortably as she wielded a scalpel. “This is insane. You’re asking me to risk everything—my career, my license, possibly my life—on an unauthorized operation against a United States senator.”

“We’re asking you to help us stop a bioweapon that could kill millions of people,”

Jade corrected, her voice soft but implacable. “Isn’t that why you became a doctor in the first place? To save lives?”

The question hit its mark. Before Sabrina could respond, Atticus stood.

“Dr. Wells has given us enough for today,” he said, his tone brooking no argument. “She needs time to consider her options.”

The others exchanged glances but rose without protest. They filed out of the conference room one by one, Cal with a cheeky salute in Sabrina’s direction, the others with the silent acknowledgment of professionals who recognized a tactical retreat when they saw one.

When they were alone, Atticus turned to Sabrina. “Let me show you something.”

He led her through the quiet executive floor to his private office—a corner suite with the same panoramic views but furnished in a way that balanced functionality with understated luxury. Unlike the sleek modernity of the conference room, this space contained elements that spoke of the man behind the corporate façade—bookshelves filled with military history and strategy texts, a wall displaying framed photographs, and a desk that looked as though it had witnessed the planning of campaigns that never made the history books.

“You’re asking them to back off,” Sabrina observed as he closed the door. “Why?”

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“Because I recognize pushing when I see it,” he replied, moving to a sophisticated computer setup in one corner. “And because you’re right—we’re asking you to take extraordinary risks based on limited information.”

She studied him in the late afternoon light that streamed through the windows. The controlled power in his movements, the shadows in his eyes that never fully retreated, the slight stiffness in his left shoulder that suggested an old injury. Everything about Atticus Cameron spoke of a man forged by violence yet governed by discipline.

“So give me more information,” she challenged, crossing to stand beside him.

As their session stretched beyond the hour she’d allocated, Sabrina discreetly sent a text to the hospital. She caught Atticus watching her as she typed.

“Calling in sick?” he asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Asking Dr. Liu to cover my evening rounds,” she replied, tucking the phone away. “Some things are more important than hospital politics.”

He nodded once, understanding the professional risk she was already taking by being here.

For the next two hours, they delved into the evidence against Mitchell and BioGenix—financial records, intercepted communications, surveillance photographs, and laboratory requisitions that painted a damning picture of corruption and deadly intent. Sabrina’s medical background allowed her to interpret technical details the Dynamis team had flagged but not fully understood, while Atticus connected

seemingly disparate elements into a comprehensive strategy.

As evening descended over Dallas, painting the sky in deepening shades of amber and violet, Sabrina found herself seated beside Atticus at his workstation, poring over laboratory reports that confirmed her worst suspicions about the bioweapon's capabilities.

The office had grown warm with the trapped heat of the setting sun. Sabrina removed her blazer, draping it over the back of her chair as she leaned forward to examine a particularly troubling toxicology report. The silk of her blouse clung to her, and she absently loosened the knot of hair at her nape, allowing a few strands to fall around her face as she concentrated.

"This cellular degradation pattern," she murmured, tapping the screen. "It's consistent with what I observed in the second victim, but the progression rate is significantly accelerated. They're enhancing its virulence."

When Atticus didn't immediately respond, she glanced up to find him watching her. Something in his expression made heat rise unexpectedly to her cheeks. His gaze lingered briefly on the curve of her neck before returning to the screen with deliberate focus.

The moment stretched between them, charged with an undercurrent neither of them had anticipated. She sensed his sudden discomfort, the slight stiffening of his posture, and misinterpreted it as professional distrust.

"I've shown you mine," she said, gesturing toward her medical data with a challenging arch of her eyebrow. "Now show me yours."

The unintended double entendre hung in the air, creating a charged silence that made her pulse quicken. Atticus's expression remained impassive, but something flickered

in his eyes—a momentary crack in that perfect control—before he turned back to the computer.

“Mitchell’s financial records,” he said, pulling up encrypted files. “The transactions were expertly hidden, but we’ve traced payments from his charitable foundation through nearly two dozen offshore accounts before they reached BioGenix’s specialized research division.”

Sabrina leaned over his shoulder to examine the complex financial web, suddenly aware of their proximity—the scent of his cologne, the controlled rhythm of his breathing, the warmth emanating from his body. She remained perfectly still, drawing on the same focus she maintained during surgeries.

“These dates,” she said, pointing to a sequence of transactions. “They align exactly with the timeline of my patients’ exposures and deaths.”

“Confirmation payments,” Atticus suggested, his voice steady despite the tension between them. “Bonuses for successful testing milestones.”

“They’re monetizing suffering,” she said, her clinical detachment finally cracking to reveal anger. “Treating human lives as acceptable collateral damage.”

“That’s what men like Mitchell do,” Atticus replied, something dark and knowing in his voice. “They calculate the value of human life against their objectives and find it wanting.”

The bitterness in his tone drew her attention to the wall of photographs. Among them, prominently displayed in a silver frame, was the image of a beautiful blond woman with laughing eyes, her arms around a dark-haired girl who shared Atticus’s determined chin and penetrating gaze.

“Your wife,” Sabrina said quietly, not a question.

Atticus followed her gaze, and something vulnerable passed across his face before the composed mask returned. “Jane,” he confirmed. “And our daughter, Anna.”

The simple acknowledgment contained volumes of grief, loss, and determination. Sabrina moved to stand before the photograph, studying the vibrant, smiling woman who’d been loved by the man beside her.

“She was beautiful,” she said, the genuine compassion in her voice creating the first real personal connection between them despite both their efforts to maintain professional boundaries.

“She was extraordinary,” Atticus corrected softly, coming to stand beside her. “Brilliant, fearless, and uncommonly kind. The kind of person who made everyone around her better simply by expecting the best from them.”

“And your daughter?” Sabrina asked, noting the fierce pride in his voice when he spoke of the girl.

“Anna survived.” The words carried the weight of gratitude, grief, and rage in equal measure. “She’s in college now. Georgetown. Political science. She wants to change the system from within.”

Sabrina nodded, understanding the mixture of pride and fear such a path would evoke in a father who knew firsthand the corruption within that system. “She has your determination.”

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“And her mother’s courage,” he added.

They stood side by side before the photograph, the personal loss that had driven Atticus’s eight-year quest for justice now tangible between them. Sabrina felt the last of her professional detachment slipping, replaced by something more complicated—understanding, compassion, and the recognition of shared purpose despite their different paths.

“I’ll help you,” she said finally, turning to face him directly. “Not just with the medical aspects, but with whatever plan you’re developing to stop Mitchell and BioGenix.”

Atticus studied her face, searching for hesitation or doubt and finding only resolve. “It will be dangerous.”

“I know.”

“You could lose everything.”

“If Mitchell deploys this weapon, a lot of people will lose everything,” she countered. “Including their lives. I took an oath, Mr. Cameron.”

“Atticus,” he corrected, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

“Atticus,” she acknowledged with a nod. “I took an oath to do no harm. Sometimes that means preventing harm before it happens.”

Something shifted in his expression then—a new assessment, a recognition of shared values despite their different worlds. The professional distance between them had narrowed over the hours they'd worked together, her scientific approach complementing his strategic thinking in ways neither had anticipated.

“Welcome to Dynamis, Dr. Wells,” he said, extending his hand.

“Sabrina,” she corrected, accepting his handshake.

Their hands remained joined a moment longer than necessary, the contact conveying something neither was prepared to acknowledge—the beginnings of a partnership that would test both their professional boundaries and their personal convictions.

Outside the windows, darkness had fallen completely over Dallas, the city's lights glittering against the night sky like stars fallen to earth. Within the office, something new had taken shape—an alliance forged in shared purpose, mutual respect, and the understanding that some enemies could only be defeated by working together.

Neither of them could have predicted how deeply that alliance would ultimately transform them both.

## Chapter Four

A week after the hospital gala, the surveillance van looked innocuous from the outside—a nondescript white utility vehicle with Dallas Metro Electric emblazoned on the side in faded blue letters. Inside, however, it resembled NASA mission control, packed with cutting-edge surveillance technology that made it feel half the size it actually was. The scent of coffee from three travel mugs mingled with the metallic tang of gun oil and the faint chemical smell of the specialized equipment.

Atticus checked his watch—an old Rolex that had survived three war zones and



countless covert operations. Three more minutes until the team needed to move into position. He looked across the cramped space at the unexpected addition to tonight's operation and felt a flicker of unease.

Sabrina Wells shouldn't be here.

Her presence was an unnecessary complication, a potential liability, and a distraction he couldn't afford. She sat beside Cal on the monitoring station bench, her dark hair pulled back in a severe knot, dressed in tactical black that did nothing to diminish her striking features. She was studying the 3-D rendering of Senator Mitchell's estate with the same focused intensity she'd likely give a patient's chart.

It had been only five days since their initial meeting at Dynamis headquarters, five days of intensive crash-course training in basic tactical movement, communications protocols, and weapons handling. Sabrina had proven herself an exceptionally quick study—not surprising for a trauma surgeon accustomed to processing and acting on critical information under pressure.

"The main gathering will be in the east wing," Cal said, highlighting a section of the display with a gesture that manipulated the holographic projection. "Conservatory and adjoining study. According to our intel, Mitchell keeps the most sensitive materials in a hidden safe behind the bookcase in his personal study on the second floor."

"Classic," Nate remarked with a wry smile as he checked his weapons. "Bad guys and bookcases. Some clichés exist for a reason."

"Speaking of clichés," Eden said, turning to Sabrina, "how's your family emergency holding up at the hospital? Anyone suspicious yet?"

Sabrina shook her head. "The chief of surgery is covering for me. I told Richard my mother had a stroke in Phoenix and needed emergency care. He arranged for my

surgical rotation to be covered—personal favor since I haven’t taken more than three consecutive days off in five years.”

“Convenient,” Cal noted. “Though a bit morbid to fake a stroke.”

“My mother actually did have a mild stroke last year,” Sabrina replied. “She recovered fully, but it made the story plausible to anyone who knows me.”

Eden, already outfitted for her role, put the finishing touches on her disguise. Unlike the rudimentary makeup techniques that might fool the human eye, she wore a complex set of silicone prosthetics that completely altered her facial structure—cheekbones, jawline, even the shape of her nose had been subtly but distinctly changed. The Hollywood-grade alterations would bypass even the most sophisticated facial recognition systems, transforming her from the striking Israeli beauty into a plain, forgettable catering staff supervisor.

“Nice face,” Max commented dryly from his monitoring station. “Bet that gets you all the second dates.”

“Please,” Eden scoffed, adjusting the stiff uniform collar that completed her disguise. “This is still a solid seven in most of the Midwest. Remind me again why we’re not just grabbing Mitchell and applying some enhanced interrogation techniques? I could have him singing like Pavarotti in twenty minutes.”

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“Because we need more than Mitchell,” Atticus replied. “We need his entire network. His buyers. His research team. Everyone involved in developing and distributing this weapon.”

“Plus,” Jade added through their comms from her sniper position half a mile away, “getting caught kidnapping and torturing a US senator might put a slight damper on our government contracts.”

“Details,” Eden said with a dismissive wave. “But seriously, you should see what I can do with a car battery and a pair of tweezers. Mossad trained us well in torture techniques.”

“Is anyone else slightly turned on when she talks business?” Nate asked.

“It’s just you,” Cal said. “I only get turned on by my wife.”

“I can hear you idiots through comms,” Jade replied, though there was affection beneath the exasperation.

“And on that note,” Cal interjected, “let’s remember that Senator Mitchell is one of Texas’s most beloved political figures. Three terms, campaign funded primarily by oil money and pharmaceutical giants. This estate we’re infiltrating tonight? Twenty acres of the most heavily secured private property in Dallas County.”

“Don’t forget,” Nate added, “Mitchell sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee. He’s got connections throughout every three-letter agency in the country. If we move against him without airtight evidence, we’re all looking at black sites and enhanced

interrogation from the receiving end.”

The easy banter wasn't fooling anyone. Beneath the casual exchanges lay the coiled tension of highly trained operatives preparing for a high-risk infiltration. Each of them understood exactly what was at stake. Each recognized the countless ways the operation could go wrong.

“Time check,” Max said from the control panel. He and Cal would be running operational support from the van, coordinating the movements of the field team and maintaining surveillance.

“Field positions in three minutes,” Atticus confirmed, adjusting the nearly invisible earpiece before turning to Sabrina. “I need to be absolutely clear about your role tonight. You stay in the van with Cal and Max. You observe, you identify anything that might be related to the bioweapon, and you communicate that information through the secure channel. Under no circumstances do you leave this vehicle. Clear?”

Sabrina's amber eyes met his with unflinching directness. “Crystal clear, Mr. Cameron.”

Something in her tone suggested compliance would be conditional at best. Atticus felt the beginning of a headache forming behind his right eye.

“We're running leaner than usual,” Cal remarked, fingers dancing across his keyboard. “Reza and Griffin are in Eastern Europe tracking a potential buyer for the bioweapon. Otherwise we'd have proper perimeter coverage.”

“We'll manage,” Jade said, checking her weapon. “Not the first time we've been short-handed.”

“Let's just hope Mitchell's security doesn't decide to get creative tonight,” Nate

added, sharing a look with Eden that spoke of previous operations gone sideways.

The camaraderie of the team was obvious despite the tension vibrating through the van. These people worked together like a well-oiled machine, their shorthand communication and implicit trust forged through shared danger.

“I mean it,” Atticus said, his gaze still on Sabrina. “This isn’t a hospital. Out there—” he gestured toward the estate visible on the monitors, “—people shoot first and ask questions never.”

“I’m aware of the risks,” she replied coolly. “I served in combat zones, remember? Your thorough background check should have covered that.”

“Two deployments as a trauma surgeon isn’t the same as covert operations against domestic targets,” Atticus countered, adjusting the tactical vest beneath his tuxedo jacket. The custom garment was designed to conceal body armor and weapons while maintaining the appearance of formalwear. “This isn’t a debate.”

“No, it’s not,” Sabrina agreed, rising from her seat with a fluid grace that belied the tension vibrating through her. “Because I’m going into that estate. Not as part of your infiltration team, but on the surveillance side with Nate. I’m the only one who can identify bioweapon components on sight.”

Atticus stepped closer, looming over her in the confined space of the van. “That’s what cameras and comms are for. You can identify them from here.”

“And if the transmission is jammed? If you need to make split-second decisions about which vials to secure or destroy? Unless your spy school covered advanced biochemistry?” She stepped forward, closing the distance between them until they were toe to toe, her face tilted up to his. “I didn’t survive three years in a MASH unit by being reckless, Cameron. I go where I’m needed, and tonight I’m needed closer to

the action.”

“Oh my God, just kiss already,” Eden muttered under her breath, earning a suppressed snort from Nate.

The air between them seemed to thicken, charged with a tension that had little to do with their professional disagreement. Atticus was acutely aware of her—the subtle floral scent of her perfume cutting through the technical smells of the van, the determination in her eyes, the resolute set of her mouth. Their faces were inches apart, and for a fleeting moment, his gaze dropped to her lips before snapping back to her eyes.

Behind them, Nate cleared his throat. “She has a point. Having someone who can instantly recognize bioweapon components would be an advantage. Eden and I can keep her secure.”

“And she’d blend better as part of the landscaping surveillance team than trying to infiltrate the party,” Cal added, pointedly not looking at the tension-filled standoff. “Just saying.”

“I vote yes,” Jade’s voice came through their comms. “But only because I’m curious to see how long it takes before Atticus tries to shoot someone for looking at her funny.”

“I’m setting the over/under at thirty minutes,” Max chimed in. “Any takers?”

“I’ll take the under for a hundred,” Cal replied immediately.

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Atticus held Sabrina's gaze for a moment longer, weighing the risks against the potential benefits. There was something in her unwavering stance that reminded him of Jane—that same steel-spined determination that brooked no argument when she knew she was right.

“Fine,” he finally conceded, stepping back to break the charged connection between them. “You’ll go with Nate on external surveillance. But you follow his lead, you stay out of sight, and at the first sign of trouble, you extract. Are we clear?”

“Perfectly,” Sabrina replied, the slight upward curve of her lips suggesting she’d known she would win this battle all along.

“I’ll keep her safe,” Nate promised, his expression serious despite the glint of amusement in his eyes as he observed their interaction. “Besides, it’s not even the most dangerous thing I’ve done this week. I forgot to compliment Eden’s new haircut. I thought she was going to shiv me in my sleep.”

“It was a very expensive haircut,” Eden confirmed, adjusting her catering uniform. “And he was watching football when I came in and didn’t even look in my direction.”

“In my defense, it looked exactly the same,” Nate said.

“Men,” Jade said through comms.

“Comms check,” Cal interrupted, all business as he handed Sabrina an earpiece. “Channel secure, encryption active. Call signs only from this point

forward.Frost, visual confirmation?”

“I’ve got eyes on the north perimeter,” Jade’s calm voice replied through the system.“Exterior security making standard rounds.No deviations from pattern.Weather conditions optimal.Wind at 3 mph, humidity 42 percent.Perfect night for a party...or an infiltration.”

“Copy that,” Atticus replied, compartmentalizing his concerns about Sabrina to focus on the mission parameters.“Deployment in sixty seconds.Remember, our primary objective is intelligence gathering.Mitchell’s hosting this fundraiser dinner for his upcoming reelection campaign, and he’s meeting with at least three potential buyers tonight.We need to identify them and any shipment details.Secondary objective is locating documentation related to BioGenix and the bioweapon development.”

“Tertiary objective: not getting dead,” Max added dryly.“I’m fond of that one.”

“It’s on the list,” Atticus assured him, the corner of his mouth quirking slightly.

“Thirty seconds,” Cal announced.

Atticus met each team member’s eyes in turn, carrying out his pre-mission ritual.It was an unspoken acknowledgment of the risks they were about to take, and a silent promise to bring everyone home safely.His gaze lingered on Sabrina last, the newcomer to their finely tuned unit.

“Stay safe,” he said quietly, the words more intense than he’d intended.

“You too,” she replied, her expression softening momentarily before the professional mask slipped back into place.

“Ten seconds,” Cal called.



Nate handed Sabrina a small but powerful pair of night-vision binoculars and a dark jacket that matched his landscaping uniform. “These will give you enhanced visual capability without light signature. Remember, we’re landscapers checking the irrigation system. If anyone approaches, let me do the talking.”

She nodded, tucking the binoculars into a pocket of her tactical vest. “Understood.”

“Five seconds,” Cal said. “Operation Counterforce is a go.”

Eden slipped out first, melting into the darkness beyond the van’s rear doors. Nate and Sabrina followed moments later, moving in the opposite direction toward their surveillance position near the estate’s elaborate gardens. Atticus was last, adjusting his bow tie before stepping into the cool night air, instantly transforming from commando to wealthy businessman with the fluid ease of someone who had compartmentalized his hatred to serve a greater purpose.

As he walked toward the front gates of Mitchell’s estate, Atticus forced himself to focus on the mission parameters rather than the unexpected complication of Sabrina Wells in the field. It would take every ounce of his self-control to face Mitchell tonight—to shake the hand of the man who had ordered Jane’s murder, to engage in polite conversation, to smile and nod as if they were simply colleagues. But that control was what had kept him alive for eight years of planning, waiting, and hunting.

He had a job to do, one that had been eight years in the making. Nothing—and no one—would distract him from that purpose.

Not even an infuriatingly competent doctor with amber eyes and a spine of pure steel.

## Chapter Five

Sabrina crouched beside Nate in the shadow of an ornate garden trellis, the smell of

climbing roses heavy in the still night air. From their position, they had clear sight lines to both the conservatory's glass walls and the side entrance to the study, along with the advantage of blending with the landscaping crew if spotted.

"You handled that well," Nate said quietly, adjusting his surveillance equipment disguised as gardening tools. "Most people don't stand their ground with Reaper."

"I'm not most people," Sabrina replied, focusing her binoculars on the conservatory windows. "And I don't respond well to being sidelined."

Nate's soft chuckle carried genuine amusement. "I noticed. For what it's worth, he's not usually that protective of team members. We're all expected to handle ourselves."

Sabrina glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. "I'm not a team member."

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“Aren’t you?”he countered, eyes never leaving his surveillance position.“You’re here, risking your career and possibly your life.Seems like team material to me.”

“Reaper approaching the estate main entrance now,” Cal reported through their earpieces.

Through her binoculars, Sabrina watched Atticus hand his invitation to the security detail.His transformation was remarkable—shoulders relaxed, hands open, his intensity masked beneath casual privilege.

“Senator just spotted him,” Jade noted from her elevated position.“Reaper is on his radar.”

The mansion’s interior revealed itself whenever the doors opened—crystal chandeliers, museum-quality art, and Dallas’s elite in formal attire.

“Our boy cleans up nice,” Eden commented, her voice barely audible through the comms as she circulated with a tray of drinks.“Every woman in the room just checked him out.”

“Focus, people,” Max reminded them, though amusement colored his voice.

“Mitchell approaching,” Cal warned.“Intercept in three, two...”

Senator Mitchell moved through the crowd with ease—tall, silver-haired, radiating the confidence of someone accustomed to power.He extended his hand to Atticus, clapping his shoulder in false familiarity.

“Atticus,” Mitchell’s voice came through the concealed mic. “I was beginning to think you’d never accept one of my invitations. It’s been too long.”

“Senator,” Atticus replied, his voice betraying none of his hatred. “It’s never worked out with my schedule. I was more fortunate this year.”

“Business keeping you busy? Dynamis is expanding into new territories, I hear.”

“Always,” Atticus replied. “I hear you’ve got your fingers in some upcoming projects I might be interested in as well.”

Mitchell laughed. “Always the businessman. Come, there are some people you should meet. Supporters of my healthcare initiatives who might benefit from your expertise.”

Sabrina shifted position, maintaining visual contact as Mitchell guided Atticus deeper into the gathering.

“That’s Dr. Elaine Cho near the east windows,” Sabrina said, recognizing the woman in burgundy speaking with a balding man. “BioGenix research director. She shut down my inquiries with legal threats.” Her pulse quickened. “Her presence confirms Mitchell’s discussing the bioweapon tonight. She came to BioGenix from USAMRIID—they study the world’s deadliest pathogens.

“Mitchell’s introducing them now,” she continued, watching through her binoculars. “Their body language indicates prior acquaintance.”

“Mics picking up conversation,” Cal confirmed. “Recording and analyzing.”

“Moving to secondary position,” Nate murmured. “Need better angle on the south entrance. Stay here and maintain visual surveillance. If approached, you’re checking soil moisture.”

She nodded, watching Nate melt into the garden shadows with fluid grace. The team operated with synchronized efficiency born of years together, anticipating each other's moves without explicit communication.

After twenty minutes, Atticus's voice came through the comms, pitched low enough only someone beside him would hear.

"Mitchell's moving toward the study with two men. Asian features, expensive suits, minimal security. Possible Korean delegation. Dr. Cho is joining them."

"Running facial recognition," Cal replied. "Nightshade, visual confirmation?"

"On it," Eden whispered. "Moving near the study entrance."

"I'm following them," Atticus said. "Need to get closer."

Sabrina watched Mitchell lead his group through a side door to his private study. Atticus lingered near the doorway, appearing to admire a painting while observing their movements.

"Security pattern indicates a two-minute window," Jade reported. "North corridor guard just checked in, won't make another round for approximately five minutes."

"Nightshade, create a distraction at the east hallway," Atticus directed. "I need thirty seconds."

"Copy that," Eden confirmed.

Moments later, a crash and exclamations came through the comms.

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“Security shifting to investigate,” Cal reported. “You’re clear, but it’s tight.”

Sabrina’s pulse quickened as she realized Atticus was attempting direct access to Mitchell’s study. She adjusted her binoculars to focus on the second-floor windows, confirming the space was temporarily empty.

“I have access to the study,” Atticus reported. “Empty for now, but Mitchell and company will return shortly. Going silent until they leave. All comms hold unless emergency.”

Silence dominated the communication channel. Through her binoculars, Sabrina watched Mitchell, the Korean delegates, and Dr. Cho return to the study, closing the door behind them.

“Reaper must be hiding inside,” Nate murmured beside her. “Risky play.”

Sabrina nodded, employing her medical training to control her breathing during high-stress situations, willing her racing heart to slow.

Five agonizing minutes passed. Then Cal’s voice, barely audible: “Security alert triggered on the east wing. Multiple guards responding.”

“Mitchell’s security team just radioed him,” Jade reported. “They’re informing him of a potential breach. Drunk guest and companion in the closed wing.”

Through the study windows, Sabrina saw Mitchell answer a phone call, his expression shifting from annoyance to concern. He said something to his guests, and

they immediately gathered their materials.

“They’re leaving the study,” she reported. “Mitchell appears agitated. Something’s spooked him.”

The moment the door closed behind the last person, Atticus’s voice returned: “I’m clear. Scanning documents with LuxScan to copy all files including Operation Blackbird folder. Sixty seconds to completion.”

“Security sweeping the second floor,” Cal warned. “Forty-five seconds before they reach the study. You won’t get out with the copies before you’re found.”

“Engaging locks from the inside,” Atticus said calmly. “That’ll buy me twenty seconds.”

“Window extraction is your best option,” Jade advised. “East side has a decorative trellis that will support your weight. I’ve got you covered.”

Security voices echoed through the door as sweat trickled down Atticus’s spine. The LuxScan screen showed download completion, and he grabbed the device, running to the window as the doorknob rattled.

Sabrina held her breath, watching Atticus appear at the window. He slid it open smoothly, swinging himself onto the narrow ledge with fluid grace and closing the window behind him.

“Guards using the master key,” Cal whispered.

Atticus reached for the trellis, testing it briefly before transferring his weight. The ironwork creaked but held as he began a controlled descent.

“Motion on the east perimeter,” Cal alerted. “Security team from the drunk guest incident heading back to the house.”

“I see them,” Nate confirmed. “Two guards, moving fast.”

Atticus was halfway down when the study door burst open above him. Voices shouted, and flashlight beams swept across the grounds.

“Hold position,” Jade ordered. “They haven’t spotted him yet.”

Atticus froze in shadow as guards scanned the grounds with flashlights. After ten excruciating seconds, they withdrew, apparently concluding no one could have escaped that way.

The moment they disappeared, Atticus resumed his descent, dropping the final six feet to land in a crouch on the manicured lawn.

“On the move,” he reported. “Extraction route Charlie.”

“Copy that,” Max confirmed. “Nightshade is clear. Clearing the southeast perimeter now.”

Atticus moved with swift purpose through shadows toward Sabrina’s position. She glimpsed his face through the binoculars—focused, determined, alive with adrenaline.

“Security response escalating,” Cal warned. “They’re initiating a full ground sweep. All teams prepare for immediate extraction.”

Sabrina scanned the grounds frantically for approaching security. Her gaze caught movement near the south garden entrance—a guard with a flashlight moving



methodically along the perimeter.

“Security approaching surveillance position alpha,” she reported. “Warlock?”

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“Hold position.” Nate’s voice remained steady. “I’ve got eyes on him. Routine check. Don’t move.”

Sabrina pressed deeper into the trellis shadows as her heart pounded. The guard approached steadily, his flashlight sweeping across garden beds yards from her position.

“Security converging on your position,” Cal warned. “All teams extract immediately.”

The guard’s light swept closer, illuminating roses just feet away. She held her breath, muscles locked.

Suddenly, a strong arm encircled her waist from behind, pulling her into deeper shadow between the trellis and a massive topiary. A hand covered her mouth, preventing her startled gasp.

“Don’t move,” Atticus whispered into her ear, his breath warm against her skin. His body pressed solid against her back, his arm like iron around her waist as the guard’s light swept past.

For endless seconds, they remained frozen—her back against his chest, their bodies aligned from shoulder to knee in the confined space. Sabrina registered every point of contact, the solid strength of him, the controlled rhythm of his breathing despite his heart-pounding escape.

The guard paused, his light hovering near their hiding place. Atticus’s arm tightened almost imperceptibly, his body tense and ready to move if discovered. The moment

stretched, her pulse thundering.

Then the guard's radio crackled to life, and a voice instructed him to report to the main entrance. With a final sweep, he turned and departed, footsteps fading into distance.

Only then did Atticus release her, his hand dropping from her mouth, his arm unwinding from her waist. The sudden absence of his warmth left her oddly bereft despite the summer heat.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice low and controlled despite the adrenaline coursing through him.

Sabrina nodded, not trusting her voice immediately. "Fine," she finally managed. "You?"

His expression was granite in the dim light, but something burned in his eyes. "We need to move. Now. Everyone to extraction points. Mitchell's security is on high alert."

Nate materialized beside them. Through her earpiece, Sabrina heard Cal coordinating the team's withdrawal. "Nightshade is clear, headed to secondary rendezvous. Frost, status?"

"Disassembling position, will meet at secondary. Status on primary team?"

"Moving to extraction point now," Atticus confirmed, lengthening his stride as they reached the wooded area separating Mitchell's estate from neighboring properties. "ETA three minutes."

"Copy that," Cal replied. "And Viper? You owe me a hundred bucks. That was definitely under thirty minutes."

“Really not the time, Cal,” Atticus growled.

“Hey, a bet’s a bet,” Max said.

Sabrina matched Atticus’s pace, adrenaline driving her forward through the wooded area. The extraction route utilized natural cover provided by the landscape.

They reached the extraction point—a service road where their disguised van waited—in precisely three minutes, as Eden pulled up in a catering van.

“Everyone accounted for?” Eden asked as they climbed inside.

“Nightshade’s coming overland,” Nate replied, closing the door. “She’ll rendezvous at the safe house.”

“Drive,” Atticus instructed.

As the van pulled away, Sabrina watched Atticus remove the LuxScan device from his tuxedo jacket. His expression remained unreadable as he handed it to Cal, who secured it in a specialized case.

“Did you get what we needed on the bioweapon?” she asked, breaking the tense silence.

“Partial intelligence,” Atticus replied, loosening his bow tie. “Mitchell is negotiating with South Korean separatists, not the official government. Delivery timeline within the next thirty days. Dr. Cho provided technical details on deployment and efficacy.”

“We’ll review the audio recordings,” Cal added, working on a tablet. “Extract specifics on delivery method and target.”

Sabrina nodded, processing this information with clinical detachment. “Any mention of countermeasures?”

“Nothing explicit, but Dr. Cho referenced contingency protocols for accidental exposure,” Atticus said. “Suggesting a treatment exists but is closely guarded.”

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The van wound through Dallas's dark streets, everyone silent with the focused intensity following a high-risk operation. Despite their successful extraction, Atticus remained tense, his gaze fixed on the secured device.

As the van continued toward the safe house, she caught Atticus's gaze briefly in the dim light. The intensity she saw spoke volumes—gratitude for her presence, respect for her contribution, and something deeper, something unspoken passing between them like an electric current.

Whatever developed between them was far from simple. And far from over.

### Chapter Six

The executive suite at Dynamis headquarters was a fortress within a fortress. Three floors above Atticus's office, the space had originally served as a secure recovery location for agents returning from difficult missions. Over the years, it had evolved into Atticus's private domain when work demanded he stay close.

Sabrina paused at the threshold. This wasn't just another room in the complex; this was personal territory. Crossing it felt significant in ways she wasn't prepared to analyze.

"The security is better here than anywhere else," Atticus said, mistaking her hesitation for concern. "Mitchell's reach is extensive, but not even he can penetrate this building."

The suite surprised her—not with stark functionality, but with warmth. Rich wood

floors, comfortable leather furniture, and carefully chosen artwork created an atmosphere more home than office. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of Dallas as twilight descended, city lights blinking on like earthbound stars.

“The kitchen’s stocked,” Atticus said, setting down their files. “I’ll have additional medical journals sent up if you need them.”

“This should be enough to start,” Sabrina replied, focusing on the task rather than the space’s unexpected intimacy. “I need to cross-reference the victims’ blood work with the BioGenix compounds.”

She began arranging her files on the dining table when a map on the far wall caught her attention—BioGenix facilities pinned to a corkboard.

“How long have you had that?” she asked, moving closer.

Atticus joined her. “Since the day after I met you at the gala. I’ve been tracking shipments in and out of their main facility.” His voice dropped. “Three senior researchers have disappeared in the past two weeks. All from their most secure lab division. No police reports filed.”

“He’s cleaning house,” Sabrina murmured, studying the red pins marking each location. “Eliminating anyone with direct knowledge of the bioweapon program.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

He stood close enough that she felt his presence—the subtle warmth radiating from him, the scent of cedar and clean cotton with something uniquely him beneath.

“This one,” she said, pointing to a facility on Dallas’s outskirts, “received three unmarked shipments last week according to our cardiac research fellow. Dr. Roberts

sits on the joint oversight committee that reviews incoming research materials for clinical trials.”

Atticus’s eyes narrowed. “We haven’t detected those. What kind of shipments?”

“Refrigerated containers requiring level-four biohazard protocols. Logged as proprietary research materials. Roberts said they bypassed standard inspection on Mitchell’s direct authorization.”

“Mitchell’s accelerating his timeline,” Atticus said, jaw tightening as he added another pin. “The gala breach rattled him more than we thought.”

For the next several hours, they worked in tandem, her medical knowledge complementing his intelligence gathering with unexpected synchronicity. Sabrina lost herself in cellular degradation patterns across the four victims, seeking the thread that might lead to a treatment. Atticus analyzed communications and financial records, building the case against Mitchell one piece of evidence at a time.

Eventually, Sabrina noticed darkness had fallen. Her life outside Dynamis seemed increasingly distant—the scheduled surgeries, research papers, the Highland Park townhouse she rarely saw in daylight. The relentless pace she’d maintained for years now appeared less like dedication and more like avoidance.

She remembered her colleague Sarah asking what she did for fun. Sabrina had stared blankly before mumbling something about medical journals. Sarah’s pitying look had lingered in her memory.

It wasn’t simple workaholism. After losing four patients despite everything she’d done during her military service, Sabrina had retreated into trauma surgery’s controlled environment. There, protocols were clear, hierarchy established, boundaries defined. She’d excelled within that structure, becoming one of Dallas Memorial’s



most respected surgeons.

Excellence had exacted its price: no serious relationships, friendships limited to occasional drinks with colleagues, family interactions reduced to obligatory holiday calls with her critical father. Her mother had stopped trying to introduce her to “nice doctors” years ago.

Watching Atticus across the table, a man who’d similarly shaped his life around a singular mission, Sabrina recognized her own isolation reflected back. What remained if she stripped away the surgeon’s mask and professional competence? The question unsettled her more than she wanted to admit.

Her stomach growled, interrupting her thoughts. They’d barely touched the Thai food Atticus had ordered, both consumed by their work. Even basic self-care often fell victim to her focus.

Her phone buzzed. “It’s from Dr. Cho,” she said, frowning at the screen. “At nearly one in the morning.”

She showed Atticus the message: Dr. Wells, I owe you an apology. The legal response was not my decision. I’m in over my head and need your expertise. Another researcher disappeared yesterday—Martinez from the containment team. I have information about the next test phase and formulation details you’ll need for treatment protocols. Please meet me. Crimson Café, 2 p.m. tomorrow.

Atticus moved closer, brow furrowed. “Late night texts from someone who threatened legal action against you weeks ago. It could be a trap.”

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“Or she’s genuinely terrified,” Sabrina countered. “The timing makes it credible—she’s reaching out when she thinks she won’t be monitored. The message doesn’t sound like Mitchell’s legal team crafted it.” She considered the implications. “If researchers are disappearing as you’ve documented, she could fear she’s next. Meeting at Crimson Café is smart—public, away from the hospital where I might be recognized despite my supposed absence.

“Mitchell doesn’t know I’ve connected with you and Dynamis. As far as he’s concerned, I’m just a nosy doctor in Phoenix with my mother.”

“A nosy doctor who’s already stepped on his toes,” Atticus corrected. “Mitchell doesn’t leave loose ends. The fact that you’re still breathing means he doesn’t consider you a serious threat yet—but that could change the moment you meet with Cho.”

Sabrina’s chin lifted in stubborn determination. “I can’t ignore this. She might know critical details about the deployment timeline.”

Atticus had long since removed his jacket and tie, his shirt open at the collar with sleeves rolled to reveal corded forearms marked with occasional scars. Stubble shadowed his jaw, and his dark hair was slightly disheveled where he’d run his hands through it, giving him a rumpled quality that softened his features without diminishing their intensity.

“We do it together, or not at all,” he said, his voice allowing no argument.

“I’m the doctor. She contacted me, not you.”

“And I’m the one who’s spent eight years dealing with people like Mitchell,” he countered. “Trust me on this. We set the terms—not Cho, and certainly not Mitchell if he’s pulling her strings.”

The firmness in his tone should have irritated her. Instead, she found herself responding to the underlying concern. He wasn’t questioning her competence; he was drawing on experience she lacked.

“Fine,” she conceded. “But we do it tomorrow. If she really knows something about the next phase, we can’t wait.”

Atticus nodded, pulling out his phone. “I’ll have Cal set up surveillance and Jade in position as backup.”

While he made arrangements, Sabrina returned to the medical reports, but concentration proved elusive. Her mind kept circling back to the tension between them, an awareness that had nothing to do with the case and everything to do with the man whose space she’d entered.

“Cal’s arranged a secure meeting point,” Atticus said, rejoining her. “Crimson Café at 2 p.m. Jade will be in position thirty minutes prior.”

Sabrina nodded, turning a page in her medical journal. The words blurred, fatigue finally catching up after days of minimal sleep.

“You should rest,” Atticus said, his voice rougher than before. “There’s a guest room through that door.”

“I’m close to something,” she replied, gesturing to the reports. “The neural tissue degradation follows a distinct pattern across all victims, but the progression rate varies. If I can isolate the variable...”

Her voice trailed off as she reached for another file and felt the room tilt. Despite their earlier meal, neither had eaten properly, and exhaustion was taking its toll.

Atticus was beside her instantly, steadying her with a touch that burned against her skin.

“Medical journals also recommend food and sleep for the doctors who read them,” he said, humor not masking his concern.

She meant to smile, to brush it off professionally, but his proximity overwhelmed her senses. Heat radiated from him, and she realized how long it had been since she’d been this close to anyone who made her pulse quicken for reasons unrelated to trauma.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, but the words lacked conviction.

His hand remained at her elbow, thumb tracing small circles against her blouse. The simple touch shouldn’t have affected her so strongly, but her skin tingled beneath the fabric as if his fingers left invisible marks.

“When was the last time you slept more than a few hours?” he asked.

She opened her mouth to deflect, then realized there was no point lying to someone who’d made a career of reading people. “The night before I met you,” she admitted.

“Same,” he said with a ghost of a smile that transformed his face, softening the hard edges and revealing glimpses of the man he might have been before grief carved its mark.

Something shifted between them, subtle yet seismic.

“Sabrina.” Her name was a whisper on his lips, reverent in its softness.

She looked up, meeting his gaze directly for what felt like the first time since entering the apartment. What she saw stole her breath—hunger, need, and raw vulnerability beneath his composed exterior.

“This is a bad idea,” he said, even as his free hand traced the line of her jaw with exquisite gentleness.

“Probably,” she agreed, not moving away.

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Time suspended in the heartbeat that followed, balanced on possibility's edge. Then his mouth was on hers, and rational thought dissolved beneath pure sensation.

His lips were firm but surprisingly soft, tentative at first as if testing both her response and his resolve. When she responded, parting her lips, the last hesitation vanished. His hand cradled the back of her head, fingers threading through her hair as the kiss deepened into something primal.

Sabrina tasted mint and coffee on his tongue, felt stubble against her skin, and surrendered to the moment. Her hands found his chest, the solid wall of muscle beneath fine cotton, his heart's thundering matching her own erratic rhythm.

Atticus kissed with focused intensity—thorough, deliberate, yet with barely leashed passion that weakened her knees. He explored her mouth as if mapping territory, learning what made her breath catch or a soft sound escape her throat.

Her hands moved upward, one curving around his neck while the other traced his throat, feeling his pulse hammer beneath her fingertips. She felt rather than heard his groan as her nails lightly scraped the sensitive skin at his nape, the open collar of his shirt allowing access to warm skin.

He backed her against the desk's edge, his body radiating heat against hers. One hand spanned her waist while the other tangled deeper in her hair, angling her head to deepen the kiss.

Her breath caught as sensation swept through her. His kiss intensified, and rational thought retreated beneath unexpected emotion. The walls of her professional

detachment crumbled with each passing second.

The connection's intensity shocked her—this immediate sense of rightness unlike anything she'd experienced. His fingers flexed at her waist, bunching her blouse as if fighting the urge to cross boundaries neither was prepared to breach.

Then, as suddenly as it began, he tore his mouth from hers and stepped back, chest heaving and eyes wild with conflicting emotions.

"I can't," he said, voice ragged. "I—damn it."

Confusion and lingering desire left Sabrina momentarily speechless. She watched Atticus turn away, running a hand through his hair in uncharacteristic agitation.

"Atticus—"

"This was a mistake," he cut her off, voice harsh with self-recrimination. "We need to focus on Mitchell and the bioweapon. There's no room for...distractions."

The word landed like a slap. Heat rose in her cheeks—no longer from passion but humiliation. She straightened her clothing with unsteady fingers, professional dignity becoming a shield against rejection.

"Of course," she said, voice cool despite her inner turmoil. "It won't happen again."

She gathered her research methodically, movements growing stiffer as silence stretched between them.

Atticus stood with his back to her, shoulders rigid, hands braced against the window as he stared at the city below. His reflection revealed a face haunted by ghosts she couldn't name.

“Sabrina—” He finally turned, but she was already moving toward the door, research clutched to her chest like armor.

“I’m going home,” she said, not meeting his eyes. “I think we both need space to refocus on what matters.”

“Sabrina, wait.” His voice stopped her at the threshold. “You can’t go home.”

She turned, eyebrow raised in challenge. “Excuse me?”

“Mitchell’s reach extends further than you realize,” he said, tone professional again despite lingering strain. “If he connects you to Dynamis—and he will—your house won’t be safe. We have guest suites on each secure floor. Take your pick.”

“I appreciate the concern, but I can take care of myself.”

His jaw tightened. “If you go home, I’ll have to assign a security team to watch you round the clock, and I can’t spare the agents. Not with what’s happening at BioGenix.”

She recognized the logic, even as she resented it. “Fine. But this doesn’t change anything about what just happened.”

“I know.” The regret in his voice was genuine, but so was the steel that followed. “We should discuss strategy for tomorrow’s meeting. I’ll have Cal assign you a suite and transfer your files.”

“I’ll prepare treatment protocols in case she brings samples,” Sabrina said, professionalism reasserting itself despite the lingering heat of his touch.

The door closed behind her with a quiet click that echoed in the suddenly empty



suite. Atticus remained motionless, staring at the space she'd occupied, her taste still on his lips, her phantom warmth tormenting him with what might have been.

His gaze drifted to the photograph on his desk—Jane smiling from a frame worn smooth from handling. Guilt crashed down with renewed force, and anger at his weakness flared hot and bright.

Eight years of discipline and focus, channeled into pursuit of justice, shattered by a single kiss. He had no right to whatever was developing with Sabrina, not when Jane's murderer still walked free.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:24 pm*

He pressed his forehead against the cool glass, watching taillights blur into crimson streaks below. In the solitude of the suite that suddenly felt more like a cell than sanctuary, Atticus confronted the cost of having survived when those he loved did not—and the possibility that he might never be free to live again.

His phone buzzed, dragging him back to the present. Eden's text was brief: Movement at BioGenix facility. Second unmarked delivery tonight. Same protocols.

Atticus straightened, the commander reasserting control. He replied—Surveillance only. No engagement.—before moving to his computer.

As he pulled up the surveillance feeds, his mind shifted from personal turmoil to tactical assessment. Mitchell was accelerating his timeline, which meant their window was closing fast. Whatever he'd set in motion with Sabrina would have to wait. The mission came first; it always had.

Yet even as he focused on the grainy footage of unmarked vans entering the BioGenix compound, her taste lingered—a distraction he couldn't afford and a temptation he wasn't strong enough to resist.

Across the complex, in her temporary quarters, Sabrina studied the same BioGenix feed on her tablet, sent by Jade with a cryptic message: Something's happening. Be ready.

Her lips still tingled from Atticus's kiss, but her mind had compartmentalized the encounter under "complications" rather than "priorities." She had a job to do—people to save, a weapon to neutralize. Everything else was background noise.

As she prepared protocols for treating bioweapon exposure, she wondered if her clinical detachment was truly strength—or just another wall between her and life's possibilities.

The clock showed 2:17 a.m. In less than twelve hours, she would meet Dr. Cho, potentially risking exposure to a deadly bioweapon. If she survived, there would be time to consider what had transpired between her and Atticus Cameron.

If not...at least she'd die knowing what it felt like to be truly alive, if only for a few stolen moments.

\* \* \*

Atticus hadn't intended to kiss her. He'd been deliberately maintaining professional distance despite the current that arced between them. But watching her work, seeing the fierce intelligence and determination that matched his own, something had snapped.

For those brief moments with her in his arms, the burden he'd carried for eight years had lifted. The constant vigilance, the single-minded focus on Mitchell, the grief that had become part of him—all receded, replaced by something he'd thought himself incapable of feeling again.

Desire. Connection. Possibility.

And that was precisely why he'd pulled away. The mission had to come first. Mitchell had to face justice for Jane's murder. He couldn't afford distractions, no matter how tempting.

Yet as he returned to his computer, forcing his attention back to the financial records, Atticus knew one truth with absolute certainty: Whatever was developing between

him and Sabrina Wells wouldn't be easily dismissed.

And part of him, the part he'd believed died with Jane eight years ago, didn't want to try.

## ChapterSeven

The Crimson Café occupied the ground floor of a renovated textile mill in Dallas's trendy Design District, its brick walls and industrial beams a testament to the building's history. Morning light streamed through floor-to-ceiling windows, casting golden patterns across polished wood floors while patrons chatted over artisanal coffee and pastries. The scent of freshly ground beans mingled with the sweetness of baked goods, creating an atmosphere both sophisticated and welcoming.

Sabrina had arrived early, selecting a corner table that afforded a clear view of both entrances while positioning herself with her back to the wall—a habit from her Navy days that had saved her life more than once. She'd chosen her outfit with care: tailored black pants and a silk blouse in deep teal that brought out the amber in her eyes without attracting undue attention. Professional enough to meet a colleague, casual enough not to look out of place in the fashionable café.

"Frost's in position at the corner table," Atticus's voice murmured through the nearly invisible earpiece nestled against her skin. "I've got eyes on the south entrance from across the street. No sign of Cho yet."

She acknowledged with the barest nod, lifting her coffee cup to mask the movement. The weight of the Glock at her ankle was both reassuring and foreign—she'd spent years saving lives, not preparing to defend her own. But after the events at Mitchell's estate, there was no denying the reality of the danger they faced.

Jade sat at a nearby table, pretending to read a dog-eared paperback while

maintaining perfect awareness of the room. She'd positioned herself close enough to reach Sabrina within seconds if needed, yet far enough away not to draw connection between them. Her casual attire—jeans and an oversized sweater—concealed both her lethal capabilities and at least three weapons Sabrina had counted.

“Someone matching Cho's description approaching from the north,” Atticus reported, his deep voice bringing unexpected warmth despite the clinical recitation of his words. “Alone, carrying a travel mug and file folder. Walking with purpose but checking her surroundings continuously.”

Sabrina scanned the entrance, spotting Dr. Elaine Cho immediately. The woman's dark eyes darted around the café with the wary assessment of prey sensing predators nearby. Her austere charcoal pantsuit hung slightly looser than at Mitchell's gala, evidence of meals missed to stress and fear. The BioGenix security badge still clipped to her waist confirmed she'd come directly from the laboratory, risking everything to be here.

Their eyes met across the room, and Sabrina raised her hand in a subtle signal. Relief visibly washed over Cho's features, followed immediately by renewed wariness as she approached with the measured steps of someone crossing a minefield.

“Dr. Wells,” she said, her voice pitched low and controlled despite the tension radiating from her. “Thank you for agreeing to meet.”

“Dr. Cho.” Sabrina gestured to the empty chair across from her, positioning Cho with her back to the room—a subtle power play that didn't go unnoticed by the researcher. “Please, sit.”

Cho's gaze swept the café again, lingering on exits and patrons she deemed suspicious. “I see you're alone. Smart move. Less conspicuous.”

“You mentioned it was urgent,” Sabrina replied, taking a measured sip of her coffee. She didn’t mention that Atticus and Jade were watching their every move, or that Dynamis operatives posing as baristas and customers had secured the entire establishment before she’d arrived. “I thought discretion was appropriate.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:24 pm*

“It is.” Cho’s fingers drummed a nervous rhythm against her travel mug, the silver thermal container clutched like a lifeline. “I swept myself for trackers before leaving BioGenix. I took three different routes to get here. If I’m being followed, we’re both already in danger.”

“Yet you came anyway,” Sabrina observed, studying the woman’s face. Dark circles shadowed eyes that darted continuously to the door. “Why?”

“Look, I didn’t have a choice about the legal response when you started asking questions, Dr. Wells. The protocols are clear—any external inquiry gets routed to legal. I tried to warn you off with the HIPAA excuse.”

“Warn me off?” The implication hung between them, heavy with meaning.

“You’re good at your job—too good. You recognized patterns no one else connected.” Cho’s fingers wrapped tighter around her mug, knuckles whitening with the strain. “I knew it would put you on their radar. I hoped the legal threats would scare you enough to back off.”

“Yet here you are, meeting with me despite those same threats,” Sabrina countered, keeping her voice level despite the adrenaline beginning to course through her veins. “Why?”

“Because Martinez disappeared yesterday.” Fear flashed across Cho’s face, raw and undisguised. “Lead containment technician at BioGenix. Third one this month. Williams and Chen last week, now Martinez.” Her voice dropped to a whisper that barely carried across the table. “They’re cleaning house, Dr. Wells. Anyone who

knows too much about Blackbird is being...removed.”

“Tell us about Operation Blackbird,” Atticus instructed through Sabrina’s earpiece, his voice calm and commanding.

Sabrina took a measured sip of her coffee, using the motion to mask her response to Atticus before addressing Cho directly. “What exactly is Operation Blackbird? I need to understand what we’re dealing with.”

“It started as legitimate research into targeted immunotherapy—using engineered proteins to attack specific cancer cells while leaving healthy tissue untouched.” Cho’s hands trembled slightly against the stainless steel of her travel mug. “Mitchell’s foundation provided the initial funding. The applications were groundbreaking—revolutionary, even.”

“Until someone realized the targeting mechanism could be reversed,” Sabrina concluded grimly, opening the folder Cho had placed on the table to find molecular diagrams and testing protocols. Her medical training immediately recognized the implications. “Instead of protecting healthy cells, you could program it to destroy them.”

“Exactly.” The word carried the weight of Cho’s guilt, her voice bitter with self-recrimination. “The switch happened gradually, so subtle most of us didn’t realize what we were creating until it was too late. By then, we were in too deep. Mitchell’s security team made it clear there was no walking away.”

“The victims I treated?—”

“Accidental exposures during early development,” Cho confirmed, her gaze dropping to the diagrams spread between them. “The delivery system was still unstable. But that’s changed.” She tapped a complex molecular diagram with a perfectly manicured



nail that couldn't quite hide the tremor in her fingers. "This is the current formula. They've stabilized it for aerosol dispersal. Colorless, odorless, with a ninety-minute dormancy period before symptoms appear."

Sabrina studied the diagram, her medical training translating the complex chemical structures into practical implications with efficiency. "The incubation window makes it nearly impossible to trace exposure back to its source."

"That's the point. By the time symptoms appear, the perpetrators are long gone and the delivery system has dispersed." Cho's fingers tightened around her mug again, the metal creaking slightly under the pressure. "Mitchell's already scheduled a demonstration for potential buyers. Three days from now, at a private facility outside of Dallas."

"Names," Atticus prompted in Sabrina's ear. "We need names of the buyers."

"Do you have names of the potential buyers?" Sabrina asked.

"I don't have them. Security compartmentalization—no one knows more than they need to." Cho reached into her jacket pocket with controlled movements that belied her fear, withdrawing a small flash drive and sliding it across the table. "But this contains the complete formula, including the molecular triggers that make it so lethal. If you have someone who understands biochemical engineering, they might be able to develop a countermeasure."

Sabrina picked up the flash drive, its weight insignificant compared to the knowledge it contained. Lives and deaths, packaged in plastic and metal smaller than her thumb. "Why are you doing this? Why now?"

Cho's composure finally cracked, a flash of naked fear crossing her face like lightning across a stormy sky. "Because I'm next on the list. I know I am. I've seen the

pattern—after every major development milestone, the key researchers disappear. Martinez knew the delivery system better than anyone. Now he's gone, which means the system is perfected." She inhaled shakily, the sound catching in her throat. "I helped create this monstrosity. I can't undo that, but maybe I can help stop it."

The conviction in her voice seemed genuine, but Sabrina had been played by experts before. In this world where lives were weighed against profit margins, apparent sincerity was just another form of currency, easily counterfeited and freely spent. She glanced across to where Jade sat, the woman's eyes briefly meeting hers over the edge of her book before returning to their vigilant sweep of the café.

"Proceed with caution," Atticus murmured in her ear, the low timbre of his voice sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "Get what we need, but don't trust completely."

Sabrina nodded slightly, acknowledging Atticus's assessment before asking, "What's your exit strategy?"

"I have a cousin in Vancouver. Canadian citizenship through my mother's side. Flight leaves tonight." Cho's smile was thin and brittle, like glass about to shatter. "Assuming I live that long."

"We can help protect you," Sabrina offered, meaning it despite the complications it would create for Dynamis.

"No." Cho shook her head firmly, fear and determination warring in her expression. "The only safety is distance and anonymity. Besides, the less connection between us, the better for both of us." She glanced at her watch, a delicate timepiece that seemed at odds with her practical attire. "I've been here too long already. Mitchell has eyes everywhere."

Cho started to rise, then paused. “I’ve become paranoid since my colleagues started disappearing,” she confessed, glancing at her travel mug. “I don’t trust the coffee machines at work anymore—who knows what might be in them. I brew my own in my office and keep it with me.” A bitter laugh escaped her.

She unscrewed the lid, steam rising from the dark liquid inside. “But I ran out of creamer this morning. Haven’t had a chance to drink it yet.” Her hands trembled slightly as she reached for the small ceramic bowl of creamers in the center of the table, tore open two packets with precise movements, and poured them in, stirring with a wooden stick from the dispenser.

“One last thing,” she said, looking directly at Sabrina as she replaced the lid. “There’s a critical weakness in the formula—the protein binding site. With the right counteragent, you might be able to deactivate it before symptoms progress too far. It’s all in the file, but?—”

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She paused to take a sip of her coffee, grimacing slightly at the taste. Something flickered across her face—confusion, then dawning horror that transformed her features into a mask of panic.

Her words cut off abruptly, her eyes widening to perfect circles of terror. The mug slipped from her fingers, splashing dark liquid across the table in an expanding pool. One hand flew to her throat, fingernails clawing at her skin with desperate intensity.

“Dr. Cho?” Sabrina was on her feet instantly, medical instincts overriding caution.

Cho’s mouth opened in a silent scream, her lips already blistering, turning an unnatural angry red at the edges like flesh seared by invisible flame. Her eyes locked on Sabrina’s, filled with horrified understanding that needed no words.

“The coffee,” she gasped, the words barely audible as her throat visibly swelled. “They knew?—”

Sabrina lunged forward, catching Cho as she collapsed. The scientist’s body convulsed violently against her, foam flecked with blood bubbling from her rapidly deteriorating lips. The acrid smell of chemical burns filled the air—sharp and caustic, nothing like the symptoms she’d documented in the bioweapon patients. This was something else, something designed for maximum suffering.

“Acid,” Sabrina realized with dawning horror. “Industrial strength, probably mixed with something else to make the response more rapid.”

The café erupted into chaos around them—patrons screaming, chairs scraping against hardwood as people fled the scene. Sabrina worked with the calm efficiency that had defined her surgical career, barking orders to bystanders even as she assessed Cho's deteriorating condition.

"Someone call 911!" she commanded, though she already knew it was futile. The damage was catastrophic and expanding with each heartbeat.

Through the chaos of her urgent calls for help and the rush of café staff, she heard Atticus's calm, commanding voice in her ear.

"Doc, you're compromised. Frost is moving to your position. Pass her the drive when you see her."

She worked to stabilize Cho even as her mind processed the implications. If they'd poisoned Cho before she even left BioGenix, they'd known about the meeting. Which meant Sabrina herself was now a target.

"She's not going to make it," Sabrina said under her breath as she assessed the horrific damage to Cho's throat and mouth. "Whatever they used—it's beyond anything I've seen in medical practice. This isn't the bioweapon—it's something designed to cause maximum suffering as a warning."

"It's a message," Atticus replied, his voice tight with controlled anger. "Stay calm. We're initiating extraction."

Café patrons crowded around, a ring of horrified faces and outstretched phones recording the scene. Sabrina directed them to give space, her surgeon's authority momentarily cutting through the chaos.

She caught sight of Jade moving purposefully through the gathering crowd, her

casual outfit belying the lethal grace with which she navigated the press of bodies. With the experienced efficiency of someone who'd performed thousands of surgeries, Sabrina managed to pass the flash drive during a seemingly innocent moment of contact as Jade knelt beside her.

A fire alarm suddenly blared overhead, slicing through the cacophony of voices with its electronic wail. The sprinkler system activated seconds later, drenching everything and everyone in a torrential downpour that sent patrons scattering toward exits.

Jade appeared beside Sabrina, her movements smooth as she slid an arm beneath hers. "Time to go," she said, her voice pitched just loud enough to be heard over the chaos. "They'll be sending backup to finish the job."

Sabrina hesitated, looking back at Cho's still form as water streamed over her lifeless features. Professional responsibility warred with survival instinct, the oath she'd taken as a doctor battling against the more primal urge for self-preservation.

"She's gone," Jade said in her ear, her voice low and unyielding. "And if we don't leave now, you might be next."

The stark reality of the situation clicked into place. Sabrina had seen enough death to recognize when medical intervention was futile. Whatever they'd put in Cho's coffee had been engineered for one purpose only—to kill with maximum suffering as a warning to others.

She gave a single nod and allowed Jade to guide her through the chaos toward a service exit at the back of the café. In the confusion of the fire alarm and sprinklers, no one noticed them slip away, leaving behind not just a dead woman, but the last vestiges of Sabrina's life before Dynamis.

"Reaper has a vehicle waiting," Jade explained as they moved swiftly through the

alley behind the building, the August heat hitting them like a wall after the air-conditioned café. “Cypher’s erasing your presence here completely. By the time the police sort through this, there won’t be a record of you meeting with Cho.”

The clinical part of Sabrina’s mind noted the efficiency with which Dynamis operated, even as another part reeled from the implications. This wasn’t just a corporate security team—this was power beyond what most government agencies could deploy.

They emerged into a side street where an unmarked SUV waited, engine running. Sabrina saw Atticus step out, his tall frame unmistakable even at a distance, heat radiating from the pavement in visible waves that distorted the air around him.

Their eyes met across the space between them, and the intensity of his gaze hit her with almost physical force. Concern, anger, determination—and beneath it all, the unresolved tension from the night before.

“Get in,” he said simply, holding the door open.

As she slid into the vehicle, her surgeon’s hands still stained with Cho’s blood, Sabrina felt a chill that had nothing to do with her rain-soaked clothes. She’d become a liability to Mitchell—a loose end that needed to be eliminated.

“The flash drive is intact,” Jade reported as she joined them in the vehicle. “Let’s hope it was worth Cho’s life.”

“She told me Mitchell’s demonstration for potential buyers is scheduled in three days,” Sabrina added, struggling to maintain her professional detachment. “She didn’t stand a chance. That wasn’t just acid—it was engineered to cause maximum damage. They murdered her in broad daylight, in a public place, because they could.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:24 pm*

“Because they wanted to send a message,” Atticus corrected, his voice hardening as the vehicle pulled away. “To anyone considering betraying Mitchell.”

“Or to anyone getting too close to the truth.” Sabrina met his gaze directly. “They know who I am. They know what I know.”

The unspoken question hung between them—how far would Mitchell go to silence her?

“We move to full containment protocol,” Atticus decided, his fingers flying over a secure device. “Dynamis headquarters lockdown. No one in or out without my direct authorization.”

His eyes found hers again, the intensity of his gaze leaving no room for argument. “And you stay under our protection until this is over.”

Any other time, she might have bristled at the command. But Sabrina had spent enough time in combat zones to recognize when tactical retreat was the only logical option. She nodded once, acknowledging the reality of her situation.

“Three days,” she said, looking at the flash drive now in Atticus’s possession. “Whatever is on there is our best hope of stopping Mitchell before the demonstration.”

“Then let’s not waste time,” he replied, his attention momentarily diverted by an incoming message on his phone.



Sabrina watched as he read whatever had appeared on the screen. For the briefest instant, something flashed across his face—not just anger or determination, but raw fear. It vanished so quickly she might have imagined it, but the rigid set of his jaw as he slipped the phone back into his pocket told her something had changed.

The stakes had just gotten higher, and Sabrina had the distinct impression that she was no longer the only one in Mitchell's crosshairs.

As the armored vehicle wound through Dallas traffic, she caught Atticus watching her, his expression unreadable except for the intensity of his focus. Whatever had begun between them—whatever complications lay between past and present—would have to wait.

They had three days to stop a madman with a bioweapon.

And someone had just declared war.

## Chapter Eight

The Dynamis complex transformed before Sabrina's eyes, morphing from the sleek glass tower that dominated the Dallas skyline into what she could only describe as a military-grade fortress. Steel barriers slid silently into place across floor-to-ceiling windows. Security teams materialized at control points throughout the building, armed with weapons that definitely weren't standard issue for private security.

Sabrina tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, acutely aware of the rumpled state of her silk blouse. The elegant outfit she'd worn to meet Cho felt like it belonged to another woman in another lifetime.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text. She glanced down to see Richard Maitland's name on the screen.

Administration approved your emergency leave without question, the chief of surgery had written. I've personally reassigned your surgeries and trauma rotation. Dr. Liu will cover your most critical patients. Take whatever time you need with your mother—the hospital will still be standing when you return.

A postscript followed: And Sabrina? This is the first time in five years you've requested more than a weekend off. Nobody's questioning the necessity. Focus on family right now.

She felt a pang of guilt at the deception, but Richard's genuine concern only reinforced why she'd become a doctor in the first place. If stopping Mitchell meant saving countless lives, the temporary lie was worth it. She sent back a quick thank you, adding that her mother's condition was "stable but requiring attention," maintaining the cover story while giving herself flexibility.

It was strange how quickly her carefully constructed life at Dallas Memorial had receded into the background. Just days ago, her surgical rotation and research had consumed every waking moment. Now they felt like someone else's responsibilities—important, but disconnected from the urgent reality of Mitchell's bioweapon and the growing danger surrounding her.

"Welcome to lockdown protocol," Jade said as she led Sabrina through a series of biometric checkpoints. Her normally laconic demeanor had shifted to hyper-vigilance, eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. Dressed in black BDUs, a fitted black shirt and combat boots that made no sound on the polished floors, she moved with lethal grace, absently touching the knife strapped to her thigh—a habit Sabrina had noticed each time they entered a new space.

"We occupy the top eight floors, with three additional sublevels beneath the parking garage," Jade continued, pausing to remove the elastic from her wrist and gather her dark hair into a tight ponytail. "Once we're sealed, this place could withstand a

coordinated military assault.”

“Or a corrupt senator with government resources,” Sabrina replied, struggling to process the rapid shift in her reality. She twisted the small silver ring on her right hand—a nervous habit she’d developed during medical school and never quite abandoned. Twelve hours ago, she’d been Dr. Wells, respected trauma surgeon. Now she was a target with a price on her head.

The elevator required Jade’s handprint, retinal scan, and voice authorization before descending to sublevel two. When the doors opened, Sabrina stepped into a world she’d never imagined existed beneath the polished corporate veneer of Dynamis Security.

The command center spread before them—a cavernous space dominated by a central platform ringed with workstations. Massive screens covered the walls, displaying satellite images, security feeds, and data streams that Sabrina couldn’t begin to interpret. The August heat that had scorched Dallas aboveground was nonexistent here, replaced by the steady chill of climate-controlled precision that raised goose bumps on her arms.

Cal hunched over his workstation, brow furrowed in concentration as his fingers flew across three separate keyboards.

Across the platform, two men Sabrina hadn’t met before worked with identical intensity. One—tall and lean with close-cropped silver hair despite his relative youth—was directing a team via multiple comm channels, his British accent clipped and authoritative. The other—darker, with the weathered complexion of someone who’d spent years in harsh climates—manipulated what appeared to be a three-dimensional rendering of Mitchell’s estate, his long fingers moving with the grace of a concert pianist.

Eden and Nate stood examining a tactical map of Dallas, their movements synchronized with the easy familiarity of a couple who'd spent nearly eight years navigating danger together. Eden had changed into tactical gear—black cargo pants and a fitted tank top that revealed the upper edge of a puckered scar tissue on her chest. The ragged, circular mark was unmistakably a bullet wound, and Sabrina's medical training instantly recognized the professional skill that had saved her life.

Sabrina found herself staring, unable to imagine surviving such trauma. Eden caught her gaze and held it, neither embarrassed nor defiant about the scar—simply acknowledging its existence as a fact of her history.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:25 pm*

Max coordinated with agents on video feeds in multiple languages, his massive frame somehow appearing larger in the blue-tinged light of the monitors. Unlike the others who carried tension in their shoulders or hands, Max's anxiety manifested in his constant movement—shifting from foot to foot, rolling his massive shoulders, cracking his neck at regular intervals.

And at the center of it all, Atticus.

He stood with his back to her, issuing directives in the clipped, authoritative tone of someone who expected immediate compliance. His jacket was gone, shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows, exposing forearms corded with muscle. The Rolex on his left wrist caught the light as he gestured toward a security feed, and Sabrina noticed the small, almost imperceptible tremor in his right hand—a microsecond of vulnerability before his fingers curled into a fist, steadying themselves through sheer force of will.

Despite everything, Sabrina found her gaze lingering on the strong line of his shoulders, the memory of his body against hers still electric beneath her skin.

“Anna's detail confirms secure perimeter,” he was saying into his headset, rubbing absently at the scar along his jawline—a tell she'd noticed whenever his daughter was mentioned. “I want hourly check-ins and real-time tracking. No excuses.”

He turned, sensing her presence with that uncanny awareness he seemed to possess. Their eyes locked across the room—acknowledgment of danger, shared purpose, and beneath it all, the undeniable current that neither of them was prepared to name.

“Sabrina,” he acknowledged with a nod. His gaze traveled over her, noting the rumpled blouse, the fatigue shadowing her eyes, the tension in her shoulders. For a moment, something softened in his expression—concern, perhaps—before the professional mask slipped back into place. “Jade will get you settled. We’re mobilizing every resource we have.”

“Flash drive’s encrypted,” Cal announced, breaking the moment. He reached for his energy drink. “Military-grade protocols. Not impossible, just time consuming.”

“How much time?” Atticus asked, moving toward Cal’s station. He rolled his shoulders, the only outward sign of the tension coiled inside him, and Sabrina caught herself mimicking the movement to ease her own stiffness.

“Four hours, minimum. Unless...” Cal’s hands stilled over the keyboard. “Actually, three minutes.” He flashed a grim smile at Sabrina, revealing the small gap between his front teeth that softened his otherwise sharp features. “Hospital systems use similar encryption protocols for patient data protection, don’t they, Doc?”

“They do,” she confirmed, stepping forward, the familiar territory of medical systems providing momentary comfort in the surreal situation. “And Dr. Cho would know that.”

“Meaning the key might be something medically relevant.” Cal nodded, fingers already flying. “Something you’d recognize.”

Sabrina leaned over his shoulder, studying the encryption prompt. “Try BlackbirdHG1918.”

Cal’s eyebrows shot up. “Specific guess.”

“Blackbird was the project name. HG refers to hemorrhagic, and 1918 was the year of

the Spanish flu pandemic—one of the deadliest in human history.”

Cal entered the code. The screen flashed green, files unlocking in rapid succession. “Smart. Very smart.” He ran a hand through his already disheveled hair, leaving it standing in haphazard spikes that gave him a startled, owlish appearance.

“Dr. Wells has an impressive background,” Atticus said, and something in his tone made Sabrina glance up to find his dark eyes studying her with that disconcerting intensity. She felt heat rise to her cheeks and mentally cursed her fair complexion that had always betrayed her emotions so readily.

“Is Evangeline monitoring this?” Eden asked Cal, leaning against his workstation.

“From home,” Cal confirmed, his expression softening momentarily as he glanced at the wedding band on his left hand. “Eight months pregnant and miserable in this August heat, but still working. She’s running parallel decryption on the file structure.” He turned to his open laptop, where a video feed showed a woman with reddish-gold hair pulled back in a messy bun, typing furiously, her rounded belly clearly visible beneath an oversized Dynamis T-shirt.

“She should be resting,” Jade commented, the corner of her mouth twitching in a rare show of humor.

“Try telling her that,” Cal replied with a snort. “I suggested she take maternity leave last week. She reconfigured my security clearance to lock me out of my own systems for three hours to demonstrate what happens when she’s not working.”

Despite everything, Sabrina felt her lips curve upward. The brief glimpse into the personal lives of these people—their connections, their partnerships, their very human quirks—humanized them in ways that made the lethal skills they possessed all the more remarkable.

“Gentlemen,” Atticus said, turning to the two men Sabrina hadn’t met. He reached for the coffee mug on the nearest surface and took a long sip, grimacing slightly at what must have been stone-cold liquid. “Status.”

The silver-haired man straightened, adjusting the cuffs of his immaculate shirt with a fastidiousness that seemed at odds with the crisis unfolding around them. “All field teams recalled and positioned. Satellite surveillance online and monitoring Mitchell’s known locations.”

“Air support?” Atticus asked, absently wiping a coffee drop from his wrist with the handkerchief he always seemed to have handy—a small, old-fashioned detail that Sabrina found unexpectedly endearing.

“Two choppers ready, pilots on standby,” the man confirmed in his British accent. “Gear prepped for full tactical engagement.”

“Griffin specializes in extraction and air operations,” Nate explained to Sabrina, his hand resting on Eden’s shoulder in a casual display of connection that spoke volumes about their relationship. Small, jagged scars crisscrossed his knuckles—the marks of someone who’d fought his way out of more situations than could be counted. “Former British SAS. Call sign Merlin. If you need to get in or out of somewhere impossible, he’s your man.”

Griffin nodded to her with professional courtesy. “Dr. Wells. Welcome to the madhouse.” He absently straightened a pen on the desk beside him, aligning it perfectly perpendicular to the edge—another hint of the precise, ordered mind beneath the calm exterior.

The darker man stepped forward, features sharp and hawkish beneath desert-tanned skin. Unlike the others in tactical gear or business attire, he wore a simple gray henley and cargo pants, with well-worn hiking boots that had seen countless miles. A thin



silver chain with a small Star of David pendant was barely visible at his neck, his fingers occasionally touching it as if for reassurance.

“Perimeter security at the demonstration site is extensive but manageable,” he reported, his voice carrying the musical lilt of his Middle Eastern origins. “Three access points with potential for covert entry.”

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“Sabrina, meet Reza,” Eden said. “Infiltration specialist. He can get through security systems the rest of us didn’t even know existed. We call him the Prophet because he knows things.” Eden tapped Reza good-naturedly on the arm.

“Former Mossad?” Sabrina asked.

“Different agency,” Reza replied with a thin smile, his fingers momentarily leaving the pendant. “One that doesn’t officially exist. Atticus offered me a better retirement plan.”

“Let’s focus,” Atticus said, bringing them back to the crisis at hand. He rubbed at the tension in the back of his neck—a gesture so human and vulnerable that Sabrina felt an unexpected surge of tenderness toward him. “Cal, what’s in those files?”

“Everything,” Cal replied, scanning rapidly as data populated his screens. His foot tapped a constant, jittery rhythm against the floor—the physical manifestation of the caffeine coursing through his system. “Molecular structures, test results, delivery protocols, and—hello, what’s this?” He highlighted a folder labeled DEMONSTRATION. “Looks like location coordinates and a timeline.”

“Put it on the main screen,” Atticus directed.

The wall display shifted to show satellite imagery of a complex on the outskirts of Dallas.

“Former chemical research facility,” Max identified immediately, cracking his knuckles with audible pops that made Jade wince. “Officially decommissioned in

2008, but still has intact lab infrastructure.”

“Perfect for demonstrating a bioweapon without containment concerns,” Eden noted, her expression hardening with the cold calculation of someone who’d seen too many atrocities. The change transformed her face, emphasizing the slight asymmetry of her features that Sabrina hadn’t noticed before—perhaps from a past injury that hadn’t quite healed properly. “The surrounding area is unpopulated for miles.”

“Not entirely,” Nate contradicted, pulling up population data. He leaned closer to the screen, unconsciously rubbing at the thin white scar that bisected his eyebrow. “There’s a small rural community three miles downwind. Forty-seven residents.”

The implication hung heavy in the air.

“Test subjects,” Jade said, voicing what they all suspected. “Mitchell’s going to use actual civilians to demonstrate the weapon’s effectiveness.”

Sabrina felt sick, the taste of bile rising in the back of her throat. She swallowed hard, forcing her medical training to supersede her emotional response. “We need to evacuate those people.”

“Without tipping Mitchell that we know his plans,” Atticus added. He braced his hands against the table, shoulders hunched forward in a rare moment of visible strain. For an instant, Sabrina saw beyond the controlled commander to the man beneath—a father who had already lost a wife to violence and would do anything to prevent others from experiencing that same devastation. “Cal, what’s the timeline?”

“According to these files... forty-eight hours until demonstration. Twelve international buyers confirmed in attendance,” Cal said.

“So we have less than two days to develop a countermeasure, neutralize the weapon, and shut down Mitchell’s operation before he commits mass murder,” Sabrina summarized, her medical training already calculating what they’d need for an antidote. She tucked another loose strand of hair behind her ear, suddenly acutely aware of how disheveled she must look compared to these professionals who seemed prepared for Armageddon at a moment’s notice.

“Why not alert the FBI?” she asked, looking around at the assembled team. The silver ring on her finger caught the light as she gestured.

A bitter laugh escaped Reza. “And trust the people who take their orders from the same powers that Mitchell influences?” He touched the pendant briefly. “I’ve seen how corruption works in governments. It’s the same everywhere.”

“The Bureau has been compromised for years,” Griffin added, his expression grim as he straightened his already immaculate cuffs. “Particularly in matters touching senior political figures.”

“And the CIA?” Sabrina pressed.

Atticus fixed her with a steady gaze, the dark circles under his eyes a testament to years of sleepless nights and constant vigilance. “Would be more interested in acquiring the bioweapon than destroying it. Trust me on this. There’s a reason Dynamis operates independently.”

The bleak assessment of government agencies she’d once considered the backbone of national security disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. But looking around at the assembled team—at the resources and capabilities they commanded—she understood why Atticus had built this organization outside official channels.

“The bioweapon is the priority,” he continued, addressing the team. He straightened to

his full height, shoulders squaring as he reassumed the mantle of leadership that seemed as much a burden as a privilege. “We need to understand it, neutralize it, and ensure it never reaches the open market.”

He turned to each team member in turn, issuing directives. “Cal, I want everything from that flash drive analyzed. Griffin, coordinate evacuation protocols for that community—quiet, non-alarming. Nate and Eden, prep for infiltration reconnaissance of BioGenix. Max, get me everything on those buyers. Reza, I need detailed ingress and egress routes for the demonstration site.”

He turned to Sabrina last. “Sabrina, we need that antidote. What do you require?”

“A fully equipped lab, access to CDC databases, and possibly a miracle,” she answered honestly, pushing up the sleeves of her blouse in a gesture that mirrored his own from earlier.

“The first two I can provide,” he said, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “The miracle will have to come from you.”

“No pressure,” she muttered, realizing she’d adopted Cal’s habit of drumming her fingers against the nearest surface—a rapid-fire tempo that betrayed her anxiety.

“There’s always pressure,” Eden said, her voice carrying the steel of a woman who’d survived bullets to the chest and lived to hunt down the man who’d put them there. “But you’re in good company. We specialize in impossible deadlines with global consequences.”

“Do you also specialize in bioweapon countermeasures?” Sabrina asked, arching an eyebrow.

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“No, but we’re quick studies,” Eden replied, her expression serious but not unkind. For a moment, her guard lowered enough to reveal the woman beneath the operative—a woman who had survived unimaginable betrayal and emerged stronger, yet still capable of compassion. “And we have something Mitchell doesn’t.”

“What’s that?”

“You,” Atticus said simply, his gaze holding hers. The single word carried a weight she wasn’t prepared for, and she caught herself holding her breath as something electric passed between them.

The moment stretched between them, interrupted by Cal’s sudden exclamation.

“We’ve got a problem,” he said, pointing to a monitor displaying security footage of what Sabrina recognized as her own home. Men in dark clothing were systematically searching the rooms, upending furniture and rifling through her personal belongings.

“Mitchell’s men,” Atticus said, moving to stand beside her as she watched the invasion of her private space. He stood close enough that she could smell his aftershave—sandalwood and something uniquely him—and feel the solid warmth of his presence. “Looking for anything connecting you to Cho or us.”

Sabrina’s breath caught as one of the men held up the photograph of her and her grandmother from her bedside table, examining it before pocketing it. The casual theft of her most precious possession hit harder than she expected, and she clenched her fists to keep her hands from shaking.

“They’re erasing you,” Jade said quietly. “Standard procedure before elimination.”

“Thank you for that comforting assessment,” Sabrina replied, her voice steadier than she felt.

“They won’t find you here,” Atticus said, his voice low enough that only she could hear. Instinctively, he’d shifted his body slightly, as if to shield her from the images on the screen—a protective gesture that seemed automatic rather than calculated. “You’re safe at Dynamis.”

“It’s not my safety I’m concerned about,” she countered, eyes fixed on the screen as the men moved through her home. “It’s the forty-seven people who have no idea they’re about to become case studies in bioweapon effectiveness.”

“Then let’s get to work,” Atticus said, his hand brushing her arm in a gesture so brief she might have imagined it. The fleeting warmth of his touch lingered on her skin, and she caught herself leaning slightly toward him before catching herself. “The lab is on sublevel three. State of the art, fully equipped. Cal will send you everything from the flash drive.”

“I’ll need chemical samples from BioGenix to develop an effective counteragent,” Sabrina said, already mentally cataloging what she would need.

“Already on it,” Nate said, checking his weapon with the ease of someone who’d performed the same action thousands of times. The scars on his knuckles stretched as his fingers moved over the gun. “Eden and I can be in and out of their facility by midnight.”

Eden nodded, her dark gaze meeting her husband’s with a wordless communication that spoke of years of partnership. She touched her wedding ring briefly before her hand returned to the weapon at her side.

Atticus nodded his approval. “Take whatever you need, but keep it quiet. Mitchell suspects we’re involved, but he doesn’t know how much we know.”

“So we’re playing dumb while planning to sabotage a terrorist attack,” Eden summarized, her amber eyes hard with determination. “Just like Kyiv.”

The reference clearly meant something to the team, who all tensed slightly at the mention before returning to their tasks.

“What about the buyers?” Max asked, stretching his neck until it cracked audibly. Jade shot him an irritated look, and he mouthed “sorry” with the sheepish expression of someone who’d received the same admonishment countless times. “Taking down Mitchell is only half the equation if these people are in the market for bioweapons.”

“We’ll deal with them at the demonstration,” Atticus decided. He’d stopped rubbing his wedding ring and had resumed his unconscious habit of touching the scar along his jawline—a physical reminder of some past violence that had marked him both inside and out. “International arms dealers in one location—we’ll provide that evidence to our trusted contacts. Not everyone in government is corrupt.”

“Speaking of agencies,” Cal said, “there’s significant chatter about Cho’s death. Hospital security footage has been mysteriously corrupted, but there are witnesses who remember seeing Dr. Wells at the scene.”

Atticus’s attention shifted momentarily to Sabrina as she studied the tactical display with Eden, her expression focused as she pointed out potential deployment vectors for the bioweapon. She’d adapted to Dynamis’s operations with remarkable ease, transitioning from trauma surgeon to mission-critical asset within days. There was an innate competence to her that he respected professionally—and something more that he’d been trying to ignore on a personal level.



Eight years since Jane. Eight years of waking up reaching for someone who wasn't there, of seeing a ghost in every blond woman on the street, of keeping Jane's clothes in their closet long after her scent had faded from the fabric. Eight years of living for vengeance rather than living for himself.

Now, watching Sabrina confidently advise operators with decades of field experience, he felt something he'd thought buried with Jane—a pull toward another person that went beyond professional respect or physical attraction. And with that feeling came the crushing weight of guilt.

Was he betraying Jane by noticing the determined set of Sabrina's jaw? By finding himself cataloging the exact shade of amber in her eyes when she looked up from the tactical display? By imagining, in unguarded moments, what it might be like to build something beyond this mission with her?

He unconsciously touched the wedding band he still wore, the metal warm from years against his skin. Jane would have told him to move on—had made him promise as much during those final moments in the hospital when they both knew she was slipping away. "Don't you dare stop living, Atticus," she'd whispered through cracked lips. "Anna needs at least one parent who remembers how."

He hadn't been able to keep that promise. Between ensuring Anna's recovery and hunting Mitchell, there had been no room for anything else. Or perhaps that was the excuse he'd given himself, because living—truly living—meant opening himself to loss again. And he wasn't sure he could survive that a second time.

Sabrina looked up suddenly, catching him watching her. Instead of the awkwardness he expected, she held his gaze steadily, as if sensing the conflict within him. For a moment, they remained like that, something unspoken passing between them before she returned to the mission planning.

Atticus pulled his focus back to the operation at hand. Tomorrow they would confront Mitchell's operation directly. By this time the next day, they could all be dead—or they could have finally brought Jane's murderer to justice. Either way, something would end.

And something, perhaps, would begin.

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“Handle it,” Atticus directed to Cal, his tone leaving no room for discussion.

“Already on it,” Cal replied, fingers resuming their dance across the keyboard. The constant, rhythmic clicking provided an odd sort of comfort in the midst of chaos—the sound of someone competent working at what they did best. “Dr. Wells is officially in Phoenix caring for her mother who had a stroke. I’ve created a digital trail complete with hotel reservations, meal deliveries, and even a very nice online review of a restaurant she definitely didn’t eat at last night.”

Sabrina blinked. “That’s...disturbing.” She found herself reflexively checking her phone, half expecting to find unfamiliar texts and photos documenting a trip she’d never taken.

“Yet useful,” Eden pointed out, the slight curve of her lips revealing a hint of the woman beneath the operative’s demeanor. A tiny scar at the corner of her mouth became more pronounced when she smiled—the physical remnant of some past violence that hadn’t diminished her capacity for humor.

“Privacy is largely an illusion in the digital age,” Cal explained without looking up from his screens. He paused to take a long drink from his energy drink, the slight tremor in his hands betraying how long he’d been operating on caffeine and adrenaline. “Most people just don’t have someone like me manipulating their illusion.”

Atticus checked his watch, a Rolex with a scratch across the face that he’d obviously never bothered to repair. “We reconvene at 0800 tomorrow. Nate, Eden—you move at 2300 hours. The rest of you know your assignments.”

The team dispersed, leaving Sabrina standing in the middle of the command center, suddenly aware of how completely her life had changed in a matter of hours.

Jade appeared at her elbow. “I’ll show you to the lab. You’ll want to get started before Nate and Eden return with the samples.”

\* \* \*

Several hours later and more than a thousand miles away, Senator Warren Mitchell sat in his private office in the Russell Senate Building. He projected exactly the image he’d cultivated over three terms—tasteful power, old-money refinement, the gravitas of a statesman who shaped America’s future. Afternoon sunlight spilled through tall windows, illuminating the rich mahogany of his desk and the carefully arranged photographs of Mitchell with three different presidents.

What the office did not reveal was the man who sat behind the antique desk, his manicured fingers idly turning a Montblanc pen as he listened to the voice on his secure line.

“Are you absolutely certain?” Mitchell’s voice remained perfectly modulated despite the rage building inside him. For over thirty years in politics, he’d mastered the art of never revealing his true emotions. That discipline had served him well in board rooms, on the Senate floor, and in the shadowy transactions that had built his true power base.

“Yes, sir,” his security chief confirmed. “Our surveillance team captured the extraction. Dr. Wells was removed from the cafe by Dynamis operatives approximately nine minutes after Cho’s collapse.”

Mitchell set the pen down with deliberate care. “And the visual confirmation?”

“Facial recognition is 98.7 percent positive. We caught a partial of him in a vehicle. Cameron himself was on site. The woman was transferred to an unmarked vehicle and satellite shows she was taken directly to their headquarters. She’s there now.”

Eight years. For eight years, Atticus Cameron had played the grieving widower, the dedicated father, the successful businessman who’d moved past tragedy to build his security empire. He’d accepted Mitchell’s condolences at his wife’s funeral, shaken his hand at charity galas, maintained the perfect façade of ignorance.

And all along, he’d been hunting.

Mitchell had always known it was a possibility. He hadn’t survived in politics—hadn’t built a bioweapons empire beneath the veneer of public service—by underestimating his opponents. But Cameron had been patient, methodical, revealing nothing until now.

“Sir,” his security chief continued, “we need to consider containment protocols. If Dr. Wells shared Cho’s information with Cameron?—”

“Then Atticus knows everything,” Mitchell completed the thought, his voice cold with fury. “Which means he’s known about my involvement in his wife’s death for some time. This isn’t a recent development—it’s the culmination of a very long game.”

The realization sparked equal parts rage and reluctant admiration. Cameron had learned to play politics after all, despite his military bluntness. He’d waited, gathered evidence, built his case while maintaining a cordial relationship with the man he knew had murdered his wife.

Mitchell swiveled his chair to face the window, gazing across the Capitol grounds as

he considered his next move. The Blackbird demonstration was scheduled for two days from now. Two days until Mitchell would showcase his bioweapon to international buyers who'd pay billions for the technology. Two days until his power would transcend mere political influence.

"Accelerate the timetable," he ordered. "I want the demonstration moved up."

"Sir, the preparation team has indicated?—"

"I don't care what they've indicated," Mitchell cut in, his voice dropping to the quiet register that made staffers tremble. "Get it done. And I want Dr. Wells eliminated. No traces, no connections. Her apartment, her records, anything that might link her to Cho or BioGenix—all of it disappears."

"Yes, sir. And Cameron?"

Mitchell's lips curved in a cold smile as he stared at the distant Washington Monument. "Mr. Cameron believes he's been patient. Let's show him what true patience looks like." He opened his desk drawer and removed a small dossier. "Deploy the Georgetown team. I want eyes on his daughter."

"Do you want us to move on the girl?"

"Not yet," Mitchell replied, contemplating the photograph of Anna Cameron that had been taken just weeks ago on the Georgetown campus. Pretty girl. Looked like her mother. "For now, just make sure Cameron knows we can reach her anytime we choose."

He was about to hang up when another thought occurred to him. "And send someone to BioGenix. Dr. Cho may have shared more than we realize. I want to know exactly what happened in that meeting. Have them access the surveillance footage from her

office.”

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The call ended, and Mitchell remained still, staring at the city that had been both his kingdom and his prison for three decades. Atticus Cameron. The name tasted bitter in his mouth. Eight years ago, Cameron had been getting too close to Mitchell's weapons operations, following a money trail that led directly to Mitchell's private foundations.

Jane Cameron's death had been necessary—a message, a distraction, a way to derail the investigation before it reached Mitchell himself. Collateral damage was unavoidable in politics. Mitchell had never lost sleep over it.

But now he wondered if he'd made a miscalculation, leaving Cameron alive. At the time, it had seemed the prudent choice. A man like Atticus, with his military background and connections, would have been missed. Questions would have been asked. Better to break him with grief, to make him focus on his injured daughter rather than vengeance.

Money had never been his primary goal. Mitchell had amassed more wealth than he could spend in three lifetimes through his various enterprises. No, what drove him was something far more intoxicating: power. The kind of power that exceeded political office or wealth—the power to shape history itself.

“Some men want to be kings,” his mentor had once told him. “Smarter men make themselves kingmakers.” Mitchell had taken that lesson to heart. The bioweapon represented the ultimate leverage—a bargaining chip that would secure his influence with governments worldwide. The profit from sales was merely a means to an end, funding his expanding network of loyalists and ensuring his continued control over international policy decisions.



The project had begun as a simple business venture—develop weaponry that could be sold to the highest bidder. But as Mitchell had watched the bioweapon take shape, he'd realized its true value wasn't in the sales price but in what possession of such technology represented: absolute leverage over those who most craved power themselves.

“Sir,” his security chief's voice interrupted his thoughts. “What are your orders regarding Cameron?”

Mitchell's lips curved in a cold smile. Cameron was a complication, but not an insurmountable one. “Proceed as planned with the demonstration. I want our buyers to understand exactly what they're bidding on.” He paused, considering the chessboard of players before him. “And deploy surveillance on his daughter as discussed. Let's ensure Cameron understands the true price of interfering with my operations.”

After all, power wasn't just about what you could do—it was about ensuring others knew you were willing to do it.

## Chapter Nine

Dynamis's research laboratory occupied the entirety of sublevel three—a massive space divided into specialized sections that would make the CDC envious. The medical bay alone rivaled most trauma centers Sabrina had worked in, complete with surgical suite and recovery rooms. But it was the biocontainment lab that truly impressed her—cutting-edge equipment arranged with the precision of someone who understood both the science and the practical needs of researchers.

“Impressed?” Jade asked, noting Sabrina's expression.

“Stunned might be more accurate,” Sabrina admitted, running her fingers along a state-of-the-art centrifuge. “This isn't standard equipment for a security company.”

“Dynamis isn’t standard anything,” Jade replied, punching in a code to activate the lab systems. As her sleeve rode up, Sabrina noticed a complicated burn scar wrapping around her wrist—old, but severe enough that it must have once threatened function. The rich brown skin bore the marks of expert surgical repair, and Jade’s movements showed no hint of impairment as she deftly navigated the complex security protocols. “Atticus built this place to be self-sufficient. After what happened to Jane, he was determined never to be dependent on government resources again.”

The casual reference to Atticus’s deceased wife caught Sabrina off guard. It was the first time anyone had directly acknowledged the woman whose loss had driven Atticus to create Dynamis.

“Did you know her?” Sabrina asked carefully. She moved with the controlled grace developed through years of surgical training, her body finding comfort in the familiar rhythm of preparing a lab.

Something softened in Jade’s normally stoic expression. “Jane recruited me to Dynamis. She handled personnel assessments before...” She paused, absently touching the burn scar on her wrist. “She had an uncanny ability to see through people’s defenses. She’s the reason most of us are here.”

Sabrina nodded, absorbing this information as she calibrated the mass spectrometer. The shadow of Jane Cameron hung over Dynamis—not just in Atticus’s grief, but in the very foundation of the organization.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Jade said, moving toward the door. She paused, her hand on the frame. “You should know—Atticus doesn’t bring outsiders in. Ever. If he’s trusting you with access to this facility, with this mission...” She left the implication hanging.

“I don’t think he had much choice,” Sabrina replied, pulling her hair back into a practical ponytail. “I was involved before he wanted me to be.”

Jade's expression remained neutral, but something knowing flickered in her eyes. "Your personnel file is impressive. Former Navy lieutenant, right?"

Sabrina nodded, the mention of her military service bringing back memories she rarely discussed. "Lieutenant, Medical Corps. Six years, two deployments to active combat zones in the Middle East."

"Combat medicine isn't for the faint hearted," Jade observed, absently touching the burn scar on her wrist.

"Neither is trauma surgery," Sabrina replied. She paused, considering how much to share. These people had vetted her thoroughly; they probably knew more about her service record than she was comfortable with. "I wasn't just patching up soldiers in a safe field hospital. Our forward surgical team operated less than three miles from active firefights. Sometimes closer."

"You saw combat," Jade stated rather than asked.

"More than most medical officers." Sabrina adjusted the microscope, focusing on the work rather than the memories. "Special operations required medical personnel with additional training. I volunteered for a joint program—advanced tactical field medicine. They taught us weapons handling, extraction protocols, survival techniques. How to treat catastrophic injuries while under fire."

"That explains your comfort with tactical situations," Jade said. "Most civilian doctors would be falling apart by now."

Sabrina's mouth curved into a wry smile. "There was a particular mission in Kandahar Province—three days pinned down with a SEAL team after our extraction was compromised. Two critically wounded operators, limited supplies, and hostiles closing in. When you've performed emergency surgery by flashlight while someone

provides covering fire, not much rattles you afterward.”

“Why’d you leave?” Jade’s directness was refreshing after years of colleagues tiptoeing around her military past.

Sabrina’s hands stilled momentarily. “The usual reasons. Wanted to do more research, advance medical protocols for trauma care. And...” she hesitated, then continued with careful neutrality, “...there was an incident. Four casualties we couldn’t save despite everything we tried. Sometimes you need a change of scenery after something like that.”

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Jade nodded, understanding without requiring details. “Military training, trauma expertise, and experience under fire. No wonder Atticus sees your value beyond the medical knowledge.

“Cal’s sending the data from Cho’s flash drive to your workstation,” she said, changing the subject. “Eden and Nate should have samples within a few hours.” With a final nod, she disappeared through the door, leaving Sabrina alone in the sterile brilliance of the lab.

Alone in the lab, Sabrina lost herself in the familiar rhythm of scientific inquiry. The molecular diagrams filled her screen, complex and daunting, but not incomprehensible. Her medical training kicked in, identifying patterns and anomalies, calculating potential counteragents. She kicked off her heels beneath the workstation, wiggling her toes in relief as she focused on the task at hand.

Hours passed without her notice until the lab door slid open, admitting Eden with two cups of steaming coffee.

“Thought you might need this,” she said, setting one cup beside Sabrina’s workstation. She was still in her tactical gear, the dark fabric contrasting with her olive skin, her fitted tank top revealing the edge of the puckered scar on her chest.

Sabrina accepted the coffee gratefully, suddenly aware of the stiffness in her shoulders and the dryness of her eyes. “Thank you. I didn’t realize it had been that long.” She took a sip, surprised to find it prepared exactly as she preferred—cream, no sugar. Someone had been paying attention.

Eden settled into a chair across from her, studying the molecular diagrams with a deceptively casual air. Up close, the scars were even more dramatic—testament to a violence that should have been fatal. “Making progress?”

“Some,” Sabrina admitted, gesturing to the primary screen where she’d isolated potential binding sites. “The weapon’s structure is unlike anything I’ve seen before. But there are vulnerabilities in the binding mechanism that might be exploitable.”

Eden nodded, her expression revealing nothing of her thoughts. She caught Sabrina’s gaze lingering on her scar and glanced down, touching the edge of it with a slight shrug. “Souvenir from a mission gone wrong.”

The clinical understatement made Sabrina smile despite herself. “That’s a GSW from close range. The fact that you’re alive is nothing short of miraculous.”

“So I’ve been told,” Eden replied, something darkening in her expression before she visibly pushed it aside. “Your Navy file mentioned expertise in chemical countermeasures.”

“You’ve read my file?” Sabrina asked, though she wasn’t particularly surprised.

“We all have,” Eden replied matter-of-factly. “Standard protocol for anyone joining an operation.” She shifted in her chair, and Sabrina noticed she favored her right side slightly—another lingering effect of old injuries. “Though I admit yours was more impressive than most. Field trauma surgery under combat conditions isn’t for the faint of heart.”

“I’m not joining Dynamis,” Sabrina clarified, feeling a need to establish boundaries even as she recognized how hollow the protest sounded. “I’m helping with this specific threat.”

Something like amusement flickered in Eden's eyes. "That's how it starts for all of us. A specific threat. A single mission." She gestured to the lab around them. "Then you realize there's no going back to normal life."

The statement hit uncomfortably close to home. Sabrina had tried to focus solely on developing the countermeasure, not on how completely her life had upended in less than twenty-four hours.

"How did you end up here?" she asked, partly from genuine curiosity, partly to deflect from her own uncertainty.

Eden studied her for a long moment, as if weighing what to share. She absently rubbed her thumb over her wedding ring—a simple gold band that gleamed under the lab lights. "I was hunting a man who betrayed me," she finally said, her voice neutral despite the weight of the statement. "Atticus was hunting him too, for different reasons. Our paths crossed. It turned out we were more effective together than separately."

"Nate was with him?"

A genuine smile touched Eden's lips, transforming her serious features and revealing a beauty that her professional demeanor usually concealed. "Nate found me first. He was sent to bring me in for Dynamis. It didn't go as planned."

"You resisted?"

"Let's just say our first meeting involved weapons drawn," Eden said simply, the slight curve of her lips suggesting there was much more to the story than she was sharing.

Sabrina blinked. "And now you've been married for what, eight years?"

“Almost,” Eden confirmed, the smile lingering. “It wasn’t love at first sight. More like...recognition. We understood each other without words.”

The description resonated with Sabrina more than she wanted to admit. That sense of recognition—of seeing beneath the surface to the person underneath—was precisely what had struck her about Atticus from their first meeting.

“It must be difficult,” Sabrina said carefully, fiddling with her ring again. “Working together in such dangerous situations. The constant worry about each other’s safety.”

Eden’s expression turned thoughtful. “It’s easier, actually. We trust each other completely. There’s no room for doubt in what we do.”

“And no room for doubt in what you feel,” Sabrina added, understanding dawning.

“Precisely.” Eden’s gaze sharpened slightly. “Which brings me to you and Atticus.”

Sabrina focused intently on her coffee, certain that the flush she felt rising to her cheeks was visible despite her best efforts to appear unaffected. “There is no me and Atticus.”



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“There could be,” Eden countered. “I’ve known him for eight years. He doesn’t look at anyone the way he looks at you.”

Heat crept up Sabrina’s neck. “I think you’re misinterpreting professional respect.”

“I’ve killed more people than I care to count with methods ranging from a sniper rifle at two thousand meters to my bare hands,” Eden said conversationally. “I’m trained to noticed things.” She lifted her coffee cup with her left hand, and Sabrina noticed the calluses on her palm—permanent marks from weapons training and combat. “There’s nothing professional about the tension between you two.”

Before Sabrina could formulate a response to this startlingly frank assessment, Cal’s voice came through the lab’s intercom system.

“Ladies, sorry to interrupt, but I’ve completed the deep analysis of the bioweapon structure. Sending it to your workstation now, Doc. It’s...not great news.”

The screen on Sabrina’s station lit up with molecular diagrams and chemical formulations. As she scanned the data, her stomach tightened with dread.

“This can’t be right,” she murmured, enlarging one section of the molecule. Her fingers flew over the keyboard, hair falling loose from her ponytail as she leaned forward to study the complex structure. “The binding mechanism is unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say,” Cal replied. The slight tenseness in his voice suggested he’d become more than agitated while working through the data.

Sabrina's mind raced, medical training kicking into high gear. "It's a synthetic hybrid. The base structure resembles VX nerve agent, but the delivery method is biological, not chemical. It's designed to attach to specific cellular receptors in the respiratory system and then migrate to the central nervous system."

"In English for those of us who didn't go to medical school?" Eden prompted, setting down her coffee cup and leaning forward with intense focus.

"It's the worst of both worlds," Sabrina explained grimly, pushing back the stray hairs that had escaped her ponytail. "Spreads like a virus, kills like a chemical weapon, and targets with the exactness of a sniper bullet. And based on these test results..." She swallowed hard, forcing herself to maintain clinical detachment. "It's lethal within hours of exposure."

"Can you develop a countermeasure?" Cal asked, the usual lightness gone from his voice.

Sabrina studied the formulation, already calculating molecular adjustments that might interfere with the binding mechanism.

"I think so," she said slowly. "But I'd need samples of the actual agent to test it. Theoretical models will only get us so far with something this advanced."

"Nate and I will get you those samples tonight," Eden promised, rising to her feet with the fluid grace that belied her injuries. "In the meantime, do what you can with what you have."

Left alone in the lab, Sabrina lost herself in the work, time becoming meaningless as she mapped molecular structures and calculated potential counteragents. The familiar rhythm of scientific inquiry calmed her, giving her mind purpose beyond the chaos of the day's events.

She didn't hear the door open hours later, didn't register another presence until a coffee mug appeared beside her hand.

"You need to rest," Atticus said quietly.

Sabrina startled, glancing up to find him watching her from across the workbench. The lab's overhead lights had dimmed automatically with the evening hours, casting his face in shadow and highlighting the concerned set of his mouth.

"I need to finish this analysis first," she replied, reaching for the coffee with gratitude. "But thank you for this."

"You've been at it for six hours straight," he pointed out. "Even the best minds need downtime."

"Says the man who probably hasn't slept more than four hours a night in eight years," she countered, taking a sip of the perfectly prepared coffee—splash of cream, no sugar, exactly how she preferred it.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "My habits aren't in question here."

"No, just my stamina," she said, returning her attention to the molecular model rotating on her screen. "I'm close to something. I can feel it."

Instead of leaving as she expected, Atticus circled the workbench to stand behind her, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body.

"Show me," he said simply.

Sabrina indicated the complex structure on the screen. "The bioweapon uses a multistage delivery system. First, it attaches to these receptors in the pulmonary

system—that’s what makes it so effective as an aerosol agent.From there, it migrates to the central nervous system through the bloodstream.”

“Similar progression to what we witnessed with Cho, though her symptoms were caused by the acid,” Atticus noted.“Rapid onset, starting with tissue damage.”

“Exactly.But what’s unique about this weapon is the binding mechanism.”She rotated the model to highlight a specific molecular structure.“See this?It’s synthetically engineered to target specific protein markers.In theory, if we can develop an agent that blocks these binding sites?—”

“—you could neutralize the weapon before it takes effect,” he finished.

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“Yes.Or at least delay its progression long enough for conventional treatments to work.”She glanced up at him, surprised by his quick grasp of the concept.“You understand chemical biology?”

“Enough to follow,” he said.“I make it a point to understand the threats I’m facing.”

The casual statement reminded her once again of the complexity of the man standing behind her—not just a security expert or former military operative, but someone whose intellect matched his physical capabilities.

“We’re fighting against time,” she said, returning to the model.“Nate and Eden should be at BioGenix by now.Once I have actual samples?—”

A security alert flashed across the screen, interrupting her explanation.Cal’s voice came through the intercom immediately.

“Atticus, we’ve got movement at Sabrina’s condo again.Different team this time.They’re installing something.”

Atticus straightened, all traces of their momentary connection gone.“Show me.”

The molecular model disappeared, replaced by security footage of two men methodically placing small devices throughout Sabrina’s home.

“Explosives,” Atticus identified immediately, his voice hardening.“They’re wiring the place to blow.”

Sabrina stared at the screen, a cold knot forming in her stomach as she watched strangers plant bombs in the space that had been her sanctuary. The clinical part of her mind cataloged the placement—gas lines, load-bearing walls, electrical panels—designed for maximum destruction.

“Mitchell’s escalating,” Atticus said, already moving toward the door. “He’s eliminating all traces connecting you to Cho.”

“Including me,” Sabrina said quietly.

He stopped, turning back to face her, something fierce and protective flashing in his eyes. “That’s not going to happen.”

Before she could respond, Cal’s voice returned, tension evident in his tone. “Atticus, we have another problem. There’s been a breach at the Georgetown campus security system. Someone’s trying to access Anna’s dormitory security protocols.”

The change that came over Atticus was instantaneous and chilling. Every line of his body went rigid, his expression hardening into something Sabrina barely recognized—cold, lethal focus that reminded her exactly what kind of man commanded Dynamis Security.

“Lock it down,” he ordered, already striding toward the door. “I want a full security team on Anna now. And find me who’s trying to get to her. Cal, I’ll be in command in two minutes.”

He paused at the threshold, turning back to Sabrina with an expression that combined determination and apology. “I have to?—”

“Go,” she said immediately, understanding perfectly. “Your daughter needs you.”

“Thank you,” he said, before he disappeared through the door, leaving Sabrina alone with the image of her home being rigged to explode.

She stared at the screen for a long moment, watching as the men finished their grim work and departed. The implications were clear: If she’d gone home after the café instead of coming to Dynamis, she would already be dead.

With renewed determination, she dismissed the security footage and returned to the molecular model. Mitchell was willing to kill innocent people to demonstrate his bioweapon’s effectiveness. He’d murdered Cho in broad daylight and tried to eliminate Sabrina. Now he was threatening Atticus’s daughter.

This had escalated beyond professional duty into something deeply personal.

Sabrina’s fingers flew across the keyboard as she refined her theoretical countermeasure. She would stop this weapon, not just for the forty-seven people at risk or for Atticus’s daughter, but because men like Mitchell needed to learn they couldn’t play God without consequences.

When Eden appeared at the door hours later, face flushed with success and a sealed container in her hands, Sabrina was ready.

“We got it,” Eden announced, setting the container carefully on the workbench. Her tactical gear was smudged with what looked like soot, and a thin scratch ran along her cheekbone, but her eyes were alert with triumphant determination. “Sample from the BioGenix primary storage facility. Please tell me you know what to do with it.”

Sabrina opened the container, a grim smile touching her lips as she removed the vial of clear liquid.

“Oh, I know exactly what to do with it,” she said, meeting Eden’s gaze with

determination burning in her eyes. “I’m going to make it Mitchell’s worst nightmare.”

## Chapter Ten

The clock on her tablet showed 3:42 a.m. In less than ten hours, she would need to complete the countermeasure before Mitchell could deploy the bioweapon.

Sabrina rubbed her eyes, exhaustion tugging at her limbs even as her mind raced. Since their kiss in Atticus’s office days ago, she’d thrown herself into work, using the countermeasure development as a shield against thoughts that threatened her focus. But in quiet moments like this, alone in her temporary quarters, the memory returned with visceral clarity—the taste of him, the solid strength of his body against hers, the hungry look in his eyes before he’d pulled away.



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She'd dated occasionally over the years, professional obligations making most relationships short lived and ultimately unfulfilling. Nothing had prepared her for this—this constant awareness, this bone-deep realization that their souls recognized each other. In the operating room, she'd always known instinctively which instruments she needed before her assistants could hand them to her. With Atticus, that same instinctive understanding existed, as if some part of her had always known him.

For days now, she'd caught him watching her when he thought she wouldn't notice, his dark eyes tracking her movements with an intensity that sent heat rushing through her body. She'd felt his presence before he entered rooms, sensed his restlessness that mirrored her own. The tension between them had only grown, electric and undeniable despite their mutual attempts to focus on the mission.

Three nights of broken sleep, filled with dreams of his hands, his mouth, the scarred landscape of his body. Three days of pretending those dreams didn't leave her aching and restless, professional composure stretched thin as piano wire.

With a frustrated sigh, she set the tablet aside. Sleep would be impossible in this state. Perhaps a swim would help clear her mind. She'd discovered during her first day at Dynamis that the facility guide in her quarters detailed amenities she'd never have expected in a private security firm—including a rooftop pool accessible at all hours. More surprising still had been the closet stocked with clothing in her exact size: tactical gear, casual wear, even swimwear. Dynamis's thoroughness was both impressive and slightly unnerving.

The sleek black one-piece had still had its tags attached. She'd removed them earlier,

hanging the suit in her bathroom with the vague thought of using the pool when she found time. Now seemed as good a moment as any.

\* \* \*

The rooftop level of Dynamis headquarters was a study in calculated luxury. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a 360-degree view of the Dallas skyline, the city lights creating constellations against the night sky. The pool itself was Olympic sized, the water illuminated from beneath with soft blue lighting that cast rippling patterns across the tiled ceiling. Steam rose gently from the heated water, creating a misty halo in the climate-controlled air.

Sabrina hesitated at the entrance, surprised to find she wasn't alone. A solitary figure cut through the water with powerful, measured strokes—a rhythm so precise it could only belong to one person.

Atticus.

She considered retreating, but something kept her rooted to the spot, watching the fluid grace of his movements. He reached the far end, executed a flawless turn, and began another lap before noticing her presence. He came to a stop mid-pool, water streaming from his shoulders as he stood in the shallow end.

“Couldn't sleep either?” he called, his voice echoing slightly in the cavernous space.

Sabrina moved toward the pool's edge, suddenly self-conscious in the fitted swimsuit. “The countermeasure calculations keep circling in my head. I thought physical exhaustion might help.”

“The mission has a way of keeping us up at night,” he replied, pushing wet hair back from his forehead. In the blue light, the scars across his torso were silvered, mapping a

history of violence survived. “Though lately, there’ve been other reasons for my insomnia.”

Something in his tone made heat pool low in her belly. The way he looked at her—as if he could see through every defense she’d ever constructed—sent a shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the ambient temperature.

“Work-related reasons?” she asked, though they both knew better.

The corner of his mouth lifted in that almost-smile she’d come to watch for. “Not entirely.”

He swam to the edge where she stood, powerful arms cutting through the water with effortless precision. Up close, she could see droplets clinging to his eyelashes, the slight stubble darkening his jaw, the intensity that never quite left his eyes even in repose.

“Are you coming in,” he asked, “or just admiring the view?”

The challenge in his voice was unmistakable. Sabrina took a breath and dove in, the warm water enveloping her in a silken embrace. She surfaced several feet away, turning to face him.

“I was Navy,” she reminded him, pushing wet hair from her face. “I can hold my own in water.”

“I’ve never doubted your capabilities,” he replied.

They swam in companionable silence for several laps, matching each other’s pace without discussion. The physical exertion was exactly what Sabrina had needed, muscles working in familiar rhythm, mind temporarily freed from the tangle of

molecular formulas and mission parameters.

She came to rest at the shallow end, breathing slightly elevated but not labored. Atticus stopped beside her, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body despite the water between them.

“We should talk about what happened,” she said, surprising herself with her directness.

“In my office.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.” She met his gaze unflinchingly. “And about what’s been happening since.”

“Which is?”

“This,” she said, gesturing between them. “Whatever this...current is. I can’t focus. I can’t sleep. Every time you walk into a room, it’s like all the oxygen gets pulled toward you, and I can’t?—”

His mouth was on hers before she could finish, water sluicing between their bodies as he closed the distance. Unlike their first kiss—tentative before it turned consuming—this one began with certainty, with mutual hunger too long denied.

Sabrina’s hands found his shoulders, skin warm and slick beneath her palms. He tasted of chlorine and barely leashed control, his body hard against hers as he backed her toward the pool wall. One of his hands slid into her wet hair, angling her head to deepen the kiss, while the other pressed against the small of her back, eliminating any remaining space between them.

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“I’ve thought about this for days,” he murmured against her throat, the confession rough with desire. “Watching you work, seeing the focus in your eyes, the determination. Wanting you and knowing I should keep my distance.”

“Why?” She gasped as his teeth grazed the sensitive junction of neck and shoulder. “Why keep your distance?”

He pulled back slightly, his dark eyes searching hers. “Because I haven’t wanted anyone since Jane. Because the mission has to come first. Because you deserve better than a man who’s been living for vengeance for eight years.”

Sabrina traced the scar along his jawline, the one she’d noticed him touching when he spoke of his daughter. “What I deserve is my choice. And right now, I choose this—whatever this is between us.”

For a moment, he remained still, and she thought he might pull away again. Then something shifted in his expression—determination giving way to raw need. His fingers found the strap of her swimsuit, sliding it slowly down her shoulder.

“Are you sure?” His voice was rough, strained with the effort of restraint. “Once we start this, I don’t know if I’m strong enough to stop. It’s been too long.”

In answer, she twined her arms around his neck and pulled him back to her, her mouth finding his with fervor. The water lapped around them, creating gentle waves that echoed their movements as the last barriers between them—physical and emotional—finally dissolved.

\* \* \*

“You’re thinking too loudly,” Atticus murmured, his fingers tracing idle patterns along her spine.

Sabrina smiled against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart. They’d eventually made their way to his quarters—his room was closer, as she’d pointed out with practical logic that had made him laugh. They’d slept briefly, only to wake and reach for each other again, both insatiable after years of self-imposed isolation.

“Just wondering what happens after we stop Mitchell,” she admitted, the darkness making honesty easier.

His hand stilled momentarily before resuming its path. “One mission at a time, Sabrina.”

It wasn’t a promise of forever. It wasn’t even a promise of tomorrow. But as she drifted toward sleep, Sabrina found it was enough for now. In their world of uncertainty and danger, even temporary connections mattered.

Tomorrow would bring bioweapons, Mitchell’s demonstration, and all the complications they’d temporarily set aside. But tonight had given them something neither had expected to find—a moment of connection in lives defined by duty and loss.

For now, that was enough.

## Chapter Eleven

Forty-seven faces stared back at Sabrina from the screen—men, women, children, entire families captured in satellite imagery of the small community downwind from

Mitchell's demonstration site. She'd been studying them for the past hour, memorizing features, ages, the way a mother held her toddler's hand in one image, how an elderly man tended his garden in another. These weren't abstract numbers in a casualty projection. These were people with no idea that a US senator had designated them as expendable test subjects.

After grabbing a couple of hours of restless sleep, she'd returned to the lab with renewed determination. The brief rest had cleared her mind enough to see patterns she'd missed before, and she'd made promising advances with the bioweapon sample Eden and Nate had procured. Still, something crucial eluded her—the final piece that would transform her theoretical model into a viable countermeasure.

The sample itself sat inside a containment unit to her right—clear liquid in a nondescript vial that could pass for water or saline to the untrained eye. Nothing about its appearance betrayed the devastating potential locked within its molecular structure. Yet that innocuous-looking substance could slaughter an entire community within hours of release.

Behind her, the lab door opened with a soft hydraulic hiss. She didn't need to turn to know who it was. Somehow, she'd developed an awareness of Atticus's presence that surpassed ordinary senses—a shift in the air, perhaps, or the almost imperceptible sound of his measured breathing.

“Making progress?” he asked, voice crisp and energized. He came up behind her and put his hand on the small of her back, an intimate touch that made her remember why she'd only gotten a couple of hours of sleep.

She leaned into him slightly, as if her body couldn't help but touch him in some way. “Good morning.”

His mouth quirked in a half smile and his brow arched. And then he leaned down and

kissed her, nibbling at her bottom lip. “Good morning.”

She pulled back and tried to slow her racing heart and get her thoughts back under control. This was why business and pleasure didn’t mix. She had to focus. She had to work.

Atticus looked refreshed and focused, dressed in black BDUs and a fitted T-shirt that did nothing to hide the muscled contours of his chest and arms. Despite the standard tactical attire, he carried himself with the authority of someone who commanded respect regardless of what he wore.

“I’m making some progress,” she said, remembering what he’d asked her. “I’ve isolated the primary binding mechanism. Now I just need to develop something that can block it before it attaches to lung tissue.”

“You need fuel. You missed the team briefing this morning.”

Sabrina hadn’t even realized she’d worked through the scheduled meeting. “I lost track of time.”

He moved away, his gaze intent on the monitors where she’d been working.

“What if it’s not about blocking the binding sites?” he asked, his voice thoughtful. “What if it’s about creating a chemical decoy—something that mimics the cellular receptors and draws the toxin away from the actual targets?”



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Sabrina stared at him, her fatigue momentarily forgotten. “That’s...not a bad idea. Instead of developing an antidote that acts directly on the toxin, we create a molecular sponge that absorbs it before it can reach vital systems.” Her mind raced with the implications, the possibilities opening before her. “I need to run some simulations.”

She turned toward her workstation, already calculating parameter adjustments, when Atticus’s hand closed gently around her wrist, stopping her.

“After you eat,” he said, his voice firm but not unkind. “You can’t save anyone if you collapse.”

She started to protest, but the sudden awareness of his fingers against her pulse point—warm and strong, his calluses creating a delicious friction against her sensitive skin—scattered her thoughts. Their eyes met, and something electric passed between them, a current of mutual awareness that had nothing to do with the crisis they were facing and everything to do with the man and woman they were beneath their professional façades.

Atticus released her wrist slowly, his fingers trailing across her skin in a touch so light it might have been accidental if not for the heat that flared in his dark eyes.

“Take a break,” he said. “Twenty minutes.”

The reminder of how seamlessly Dynamis operated startled a laugh from her. “Is this how it’s going to be? The entire organization conspiring to make sure I eat and sleep?”

“Only when it serves our purposes,” he admitted with a ghost of a smile. “Come on. The food’s in the conference room. Twenty minutes away from the lab won’t derail your breakthrough.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to refuse, to insist that every minute counted. But her body betrayed her with a sudden, audible rumble of her stomach. Atticus’s raised eyebrow dared her to deny her hunger.

“Twenty minutes,” she conceded. “And then I’m back to work.”

The conference room on sublevel three was smaller than the main operations center, designed for briefings rather than full team deployments. A wall of screens displayed security feeds from around the complex, while a polished walnut table dominated the center of the space.

“Who prepared all this?” Sabrina asked, surveying the impressive spread of fresh omelets, fruits, and pastries that looked like they belonged in a Paris patisserie rather than a high-security bunker.

“Chef Matthews,” Atticus replied, pouring coffee into two waiting mugs. “Former Navy SEAL who decided killing people wasn’t as satisfying as feeding them. He joined us years ago—says he sleeps better making eggs than he did making widows.”

Two cups of coffee sat steaming beside the food, and Sabrina realized with a jolt that Atticus had planned this, had anticipated her resistance and prepared accordingly.

“You’re very sure of yourself,” she observed, taking a seat and selecting a strawberry from the fruit platter.

“I’m sure of you,” he corrected, settling into the chair opposite her. “You’re driven and determined enough to work until you drop. It’s both your greatest strength and

your most dangerous liability.”

Sabrina paused, the strawberry halfway to her lips. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Something flashed across his face—recognition, perhaps, or a shared understanding that went deeper than their brief acquaintance. “Let’s just say I recognize the signs.”

She bit into the strawberry, its sweetness exploding across her tongue, and realized just how hungry she’d been. For a few minutes, they ate in companionable silence, the tension between them settling into something more comfortable, more genuine.

“You didn’t get a lot of sleep last night,” he said.

She felt the heat rush to her cheeks. She was a grown woman. A doctor. And she had nothing to be embarrassed about.

“And when you did sleep you were restless.”

She rotated her coffee cup between her palms, watching the dark liquid swirl. “Sleep and I have always had a complicated relationship. My father was a surgeon—brilliant, demanding, perpetually disappointed that his only child was a daughter rather than the son he’d wanted to carry on the dynasty.”

The admission surprised her; she rarely spoke of her father to anyone. Yet something about Atticus’s steady gaze, the focused attention he gave her, made the words flow more easily than they should have.

“He used to say sleep was a luxury for people without purpose,” she continued, studying her coffee to avoid meeting Atticus’s eyes. “By the time I was twelve, I could recite every bone in the human body, could stitch a wound with textbook

precision. By sixteen, I was sitting in on his surgeries, observing. Nothing was ever quite good enough.”

“And yet you followed in his footsteps,” Atticus noted.

“I became a doctor to prove I could,” she admitted. “I joined the Navy to prove I didn’t need his connections to succeed.”

“You excel at what you do,” Atticus said, and there was genuine respect in his voice. “Your record speaks for itself.”

Sabrina’s eyes met his, curiosity piqued by his careful phrasing. “Just how thorough were those background checks of yours?”

A faint smile touched his lips. “Thorough enough. What I find more interesting is what’s not in your official records.”

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“So I’m learning.” She took another sip of coffee, using the moment to collect her thoughts. “After that tour, I had opportunities. Research positions, private practice offers. But none of it felt...enough.”

“So you chose trauma surgery. The front lines of medicine, where every day is a battle between life and death.” Atticus leaned forward slightly, his gaze holding hers. “Where you could prove yourself over and over again, not to your father, but to yourself.”

The insight struck too close to home, cutting through layers of self-protection she’d built over years. Sabrina looked away, uncomfortable with how easily he’d read her.

“We all have our demons,” she said softly. “What are yours, Atticus? Besides the obvious.”

For a moment, she thought he wouldn’t answer. His expression shuttered, the professional mask slipping back into place. Then he exhaled slowly.

“Failure,” he said simply. “Not being enough to protect the people who matter.” His gaze drifted to the security feeds, where a small window in the corner showed a college campus quad. “Anna was twelve when Jane died. Old enough to understand what happened, young enough to have her entire world shattered.”

“She looks like you,” Sabrina observed, studying the campus scene. “From the photographs I’ve seen.”

“She has Jane’s heart,” Atticus said, his voice softening with a tenderness that made

Sabrina's chest ache. "Her compassion, her stubbornness. She wants to change the system from within—political science major with a focus on legislative reform." Pride colored his words, undercutting the worry that never seemed far from his expression when he spoke of his daughter.

"You're a good father," Sabrina said quietly.

Atticus's laugh held no humor. "I wasn't there when she needed me most. When bullets were tearing through her body, I was three steps away—close enough to see it happen, too far to stop it."

The raw pain in his voice sparked an answering ache in Sabrina's chest. Without thinking, she reached across the table, her fingers closing over his. His hand turned beneath hers, their palms pressing together, fingers intertwining in a connection that went beyond comfort into something far more dangerous.

"You were there for everything that came after," she said softly. "The surgeries, the recovery, the nightmares. You've built an entire organization dedicated to stopping the people who hurt her."

His fingers tightened around hers, the calluses on his palm creating a delicious friction against her skin. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the contact between them saying more than words could convey.

"We should get back to work," she said, though she made no move to withdraw her hand.

"We should," he agreed, his dark gaze dropping to her mouth for a brief, heated moment before returning to her eyes.

The air between them seemed to thicken, charged with possibilities neither of them

was ready to name. Sabrina felt caught in his gravitational pull, helpless against the tide of attraction that had been building since their first meeting.

The intercom buzzed, shattering the moment with brutal efficiency.

“Atticus,” Cal’s voice carried an urgency that instantly shifted the atmosphere. “We’ve got movement at BioGenix. They’re loading transport vehicles now.”

Atticus released her hand, the transition from man to commander happening in the space of a heartbeat. “Show me.”

The screens on the wall shifted to display thermal imaging of a loading dock where figures moved, transferring what appeared to be refrigerated containers from the facility to unmarked trucks.

“They’re not waiting for the demonstration site to be ready,” Cal continued, his voice tight. “They’re moving it now.”

“Where?” Atticus demanded.

“Working on that,” Cal replied. “But there’s more. Mitchell sent a two-man team to Georgetown.”

Atticus’s expression shifted to one of grim satisfaction. “Anna?”

“Already extracted,” Cal confirmed. “Griffin got her out last night. She’s at the Florida compound with Evangeline—security protocols alpha through delta. Mitchell’s team is surveilling an empty dorm room.”

“Good,” Atticus said, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. “Let’s make sure it

stays that way.I want hourly updates on her status.”

Sabrina watched the interplay, understanding dawning.Dynamis hadn’t just been reacting—they’d been anticipating, moving pieces on the board before Mitchell even knew the game had started.It spoke to the level of preparation and foresight that defined Atticus’s operation.

Sabrina watched him closely, noting the intensity of his focus, the way his entire body seemed coiled with purpose.The man who’d shared coffee with her minutes before had transformed into the commander of Dynamis—strategic, decisive, and utterly formidable.

“We need to move on this,” she said quietly.“Mitchell won’t wait, and neither should we.”

His gaze snapped to hers, something like appreciation flickering in his eyes.“Agreed.How close are you to a viable countermeasure?”



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“With the molecular decoy concept, closer than I was an hour ago. Let me get back to the lab—I’ll have something for you by the time those trucks reach their destination.”

“Cal,” he said, not looking away from her. “I want constant updates on Mitchell’s movements. If those trucks leave BioGenix property, I want to know where they’re headed. Tell Max and Jade to prep for interception.”

“Copy that,” Cal replied, disconnecting.

For a moment, neither of them moved, the space between them charged with unspoken words and promises they couldn’t yet make.

“Let’s move,” Atticus said, his voice steady with renewed resolve. “We’ve got work to do.”

Sabrina nodded, already turning toward the door. “I’ll be in the lab. When you’re ready to deploy, I’ll have the countermeasure.”

He caught her wrist just before she could leave, his fingers warm against her pulse. “Sabrina.”

She turned back, meeting his gaze.

“When this is over...” he began.

The unfinished sentence hung between them, filled with possibilities neither of them had dared to voice.

“When this is over,” she agreed softly, understanding perfectly what remained unsaid.

After he’d gone, Sabrina remained in the conference room, her mind already racing with the implications of Atticus’s suggestion. A molecular decoy. It could work—if she could develop it in time, if she could perfect it before Mitchell’s demonstration.

With renewed determination, she gathered the last of her breakfast and headed back to the lab. There was work to be done, lives to save. And perhaps, when it was over, there would be time to explore what had begun between her and Atticus—this connection that felt both unexpected and inevitable, as if they’d been moving toward each other their entire lives.

As she stepped into the lab, her phone buzzed with an incoming message. Eden’s name appeared on the screen, along with two words that sent a chill down her spine:

They’re moving.

Time had just run out.

## Chapter Twelve

The countermeasure was ready.

Sabrina studied the clear liquid in the vial—deceptively ordinary yet potentially world saving. Her body hummed with exhaustion and triumph after hours of work synthesizing this molecular sponge designed to neutralize Mitchell’s bioweapon.

“Will it work?”

Atticus’s voice cut through her concentration. He filled the doorway in full tactical gear, the compression shirt revealing the coiled strength beneath. The utilitarian outfit

somehow intensified his presence rather than diminishing it.

“In theory? Yes.” She secured the vial in its transport container. “In practice? We won’t know until tested.”

“Let’s hope that test doesn’t come tonight,” he said, moving toward her with predatory grace. “Though Mitchell seems determined to force our hand.”

“Any update on the transports?”

“Three separate convoys left BioGenix twenty minutes ago. Cal’s tracking them, but they’re heading in different directions.”

“A shell game,” Sabrina said, sealing the container. “Only one has the actual bioweapon.”

“Or they’ve divided it.” Atticus’s eyes locked on hers, the air between them compressing with unspoken possibilities.

“Atticus—” she began.

“Later,” he cut in. “When this is done.”

The intercom shattered the moment. “Atticus,” Cal reported, urgency edging his voice. “Mitchell just threw a crystal decanter against the wall when he learned about Anna’s extraction.”

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A predatory smile touched Atticus's lips. "Good. Cornered men make mistakes."

"He's deployed additional security and moved up the timeline. Demonstration now scheduled for 1400 hours. He's desperate."

"Cornered," Atticus corrected. "Let's make him regret it."

They descended to the command center, where the team was already preparing. Weapons checked, communications tested, tactics reviewed. Two dozen additional personnel moved around the core team.

"Vehicles prepped and ready," Griffin announced, his British accent clipped under pressure. "Three primary teams, four secondary response units."

"Any progress identifying which convoy has the bioweapon?" Atticus demanded.

Cal shook his head. "All three have identical thermal signatures. Can't distinguish without eyes inside."

"Then we intercept all three," Atticus ordered. "Nate, Eden—take convoy Charlie with Team Three. Griffin, coordinate from here. I'll lead Team One on Alpha."

"With respect—" Griffin began.

"Mitchell made this personal eight years ago," Atticus cut him off, his voice hardening. "I'm going into the field."

The room fell silent before he continued, “Davis and Thompson will handle civilian evacuation. We have forty-seven civilians at risk—get them clear before Mitchell deploys.”

“Max, Jade—with me on Alpha. Reza, we’ll need your infiltration skills if the convoy reaches its destination.”

“Doc—” Cal turned to Sabrina, “—we need multiple doses of the countermeasure.”

“Fifteen doses ready,” she confirmed. “Plus an aerosol version that could theoretically neutralize an airborne release.”

“Theoretically?” Eden raised an eyebrow.

“It’s untested,” Sabrina admitted. “But molecular modeling suggests it should work.”

“We’ll take it,” Nate said, accepting a container. “Better options than regrets.”

“Gear up,” Atticus ordered. “Wheels up in five.”

The team dispersed, leaving Sabrina momentarily adrift.

“You should rest,” Atticus suggested. “You’ve done your part.”

“And wait here while you risk your lives?” She squared her shoulders. “I’m going with you.”

“Sabrina—”

“This is my field. If anyone’s exposed, minutes will matter. You need me.” Her gaze didn’t waver. “Besides, I handled two combat tours. I can manage this.”

His jaw tightened, the muscle jumping as he weighed command against protection. “Gear’s in the armory,” he finally said. “Three minutes.”

Sabrina quickly selected body armor and changed into tactical gear. When she emerged, Reza handed her a Glock 19, which she checked with familiar ease.

Three vehicles waited in the garage—Reza behind the wheel of a matte black Range Rover, Nate and Eden in a similar vehicle, Griffin opting for an unmarked sedan.

“Alpha convoy approaching the I-35 junction,” Cal reported as they moved out. “Clean intercept window in twenty-three minutes.”

They separated at the first intersection, Reza pushing the Range Rover beyond speed limits through the empty streets. Sabrina watched Atticus’s profile, struck by his transformation into pure operator mode.

“Alpha convoy consists of three vehicles,” Cal continued. “Lead and rear SUVs with security, middle transport with cargo. Ten personnel total, all armed.”

“Rules of engagement?” Reza asked, taking a turn that pressed Sabrina against the door.

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“Nonlethal if possible,” Atticus replied. “They’re hired security, not Mitchell’s inner circle. But if they escalate, respond accordingly.”

“There.” He pointed to approaching headlights. “Alpha convoy.”

Reza accelerated, pulling ahead of the convoy before swerving into its path. The lead SUV braked hard, tires screaming against asphalt.

“Contact with Alpha convoy,” Atticus reported. “Initiating intercept.”

Security personnel emerged with weapons drawn. Atticus exited the Range Rover, his own weapon ready.

“Dynamis Security,” he called. “Stand down. We’re not here for you.”

The guards hesitated—just long enough for Reza to circle behind them.

“The cargo,” Atticus continued. “That’s all we want.”

For a heartbeat, compliance seemed possible. Then the rear SUV roared forward, ramming their vehicle. Atticus dove sideways as metal crushed against metal.

The night erupted in gunfire.

Sabrina dropped to the floor as bullets pinged off the armored exterior. Through the window, she watched Atticus move with lethal stealth, his return fire targeting extremities. One guard went down clutching his shoulder.

“Clear the transport,” Atticus ordered as Reza knocked another guard unconscious.

“Cargo secured,” Reza reported moments later. “Moving to check the containment unit.”

“Charlie Team has secured their transport,” Cal updated. “Negative on the bioweapon. It’s a decoy.”

Hope surged through Sabrina. Fifty-fifty odds now.

“Reaper,” Reza called, his voice tense. “You need to see this.”

Sabrina abandoned safety, moving toward the transport despite Atticus’s earlier order. Inside, a single containment unit sat empty, its seal broken—and a timer counting down from forty-seven seconds.

“Everyone back!” Atticus shouted, pulling Sabrina away. “It’s rigged!”

They’d barely cleared twenty feet when the device detonated with a muffled thump. A fine mist sprayed into the air, hanging like fog.

“Gas masks!” Atticus ordered, but the security personnel closest to the transport were already coughing violently, blood-tinged foam appearing at their mouths.

“It’s an aerosol sample,” Sabrina realized, already moving toward them before Atticus caught her arm.

“Protection first,” he insisted, thrusting a mask into her hands.

She secured it quickly, then ran and knelt beside the first guard, searching for a viable vein as his body convulsed. “It’s working faster than anticipated,” she muttered,



administering the countermeasure. “The molecular structure must be refined.”

“Prophet’s been exposed,” Atticus reported, his voice tight. “Showing early symptoms.”

Sabrina worked methodically, treating both guards before turning to Reza, whose skin had paled unnaturally.

“How bad?” he asked, voice raspy.

“Lower dose than these two,” she said, injecting the countermeasure. “Better odds, but still serious.”

“All three convoys were decoys,” Cal suddenly reported. “But satellite just caught a fourth vehicle leaving through a maintenance entrance—smaller, unmarked, with refrigeration. Heading to Addison airfield.”

“The shell game had an extra shell,” Atticus said grimly. “Davis, status on evacuation?”

“Fifty percent complete,” came the response. “Need more time.”

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“Medical team will handle this,” Atticus decided. “We need to pursue that fourth vehicle. The Range Rover’s compromised—we’ll take their lead SUV.”

He turned to Sabrina, eyes intense even through his mask. “You stay with the medical team.”

“The countermeasure is working,” she countered, already moving toward the SUV. “They’ll be stable. You need me with you.”

“Sabrina—”

“Don’t argue with me. We’re wasting time.” She slung her medical pack over her shoulder. “Either we go together, or I find my own way there.”

Something between a growl and sigh escaped him. “Stubborn woman.”

“Determined,” she corrected, sliding into the passenger seat. “There’s a difference.”

The ghost of a smile touched his mouth as he took the wheel. “Is there? I hadn’t noticed.”

They reached the airfield minutes later, approaching through the east access point using Cal’s bypass code. The Gulfstream waited on the tarmac, its engines already warming as two figures loaded a container up the boarding stairs.

“Direct approach is too risky,” Atticus said, studying the aircraft through binoculars. “One stray bullet could rupture the containment unit.”

Before Sabrina could respond, gunfire erupted from across the field.

“Santiago,” came a tense voice through comms. “Agent down. Jenkins is hit and bleeding out. We’re pinned behind the fuel depot.”

Atticus’s jaw tightened. “Warlock, ETA?”

“Seven minutes out,” Nate responded.

“Santiago doesn’t have seven minutes,” Sabrina said, already preparing medical supplies.

Atticus caught her wrist, his grip gentle but firm. “Be careful,” he said, his eyes locking with hers. “I still plan to have that conversation when this is over.”

“I’m counting on it,” she replied, and slipped away into the darkness.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sabrina forced herself not to look back.

The sporadic crack of gunfire from the direction of the Gulfstream echoed across the airfield, each shot sending a jolt through her system. August in Texas meant the air simmered at nearly hundred degrees, the air thick enough to chew. Sweat trickled down her spine beneath the tactical gear, and the taste of dust and aviation fuel coated her tongue.

Her boots made almost no sound as she moved from shadow to shadow, keeping low and using the maintenance buildings for cover. Heat radiated from the tarmac beneath her feet, the concrete having baked all day under the merciless Texas sun.

Every instinct screamed at her to turn around, to run back toward the sound of fighting where Atticus was confronting Mitchell's security team alone. But the memory of Jenkins bleeding out behind the fuel depot drove her forward. Combat medicine had taught her to compartmentalize—to focus on the patient at hand rather than the battle raging around her.

"Santiago," she whispered into her comm as she approached the fuel depot. A cicada's rhythmic chirping nearly drowned out her voice. "I'm on approach from the east. Confirm position."

"Copy that," he replied, voice tight. "We're behind the main fuel tank, northwest corner. Two hostiles approximately fifty yards southwest of our position. They're keeping their distance because of the fuel tanks, but we can't move without exposing ourselves."

Sabrina crept around the corner of the depot, staying in the shadows until she spotted Santiago's compact frame hunched protectively over Jenkins's larger one. She moved quickly to join them, dropping to her knees beside Jenkins's prone form.

"Took you long enough, Doc," Jenkins managed through gritted teeth, his normally jovial expression tight with pain. His tactical shirt had been cut away to expose the wound, the black fabric soaked with blood that appeared almost purple in the dim light.

"Traffic was terrible," Sabrina replied, already assessing the injury. Santiago had applied a pressure bandage, but blood continued to seep through, confirming his assessment that an artery had been damaged. "I'm going to need to clamp that bleeder."

She opened her medical pack, extracting a field surgery kit that contained tools more advanced than standard first aid equipment. This would be far from ideal—performing

vascular surgery by moonlight behind a fuel depot, with hostiles nearby—but Jenkins’s ashen complexion and rapid, thready pulse indicated he didn’t have the luxury of waiting for proper medical facilities.

“Santiago, I need you to maintain pressure here,” she instructed, guiding his hands to the precise spot. “And I need more light.”

He extracted a small tactical flashlight with his free hand, positioning it to illuminate the wound without creating a beacon for the hostiles still searching for them.

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“This is going to hurt,” Sabrina warned Jenkins, administering a local anesthetic from her kit. “But I need you to stay as still as possible.”

“Not my first bullet hole, Doc,” Jenkins replied, his voice weaker than before. “Just make it quick.”

Sabrina worked with the focus that had made her one of the Navy’s top trauma surgeons, her hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her system. The wound was messy, the bullet having torn through muscle and nicked the brachial artery, but thankfully missing bone. She cleaned the area as best she could, then isolated the damaged artery, carefully placing a clamp to stop the hemorrhaging.

“How’s Reaper?” Jenkins asked through clenched teeth, clearly trying to distract himself from the procedure.

“Being Reaper,” Sabrina replied, her hands never pausing in their work. “Charging headfirst into danger while ordering everyone else to stay safe.”

A weak smile touched Jenkins’s lips. “That sounds about right.”

“Incoming movement, east approach,” Santiago warned, his body tensing as he scanned the darkness beyond their position.

Santiago raised his weapon slightly, speaking into his comm. “Control, we have movement from the east. Possible friendlies approaching our position.”

“That’s Warlock and Nightshade,” Cal’s voice confirmed through comms. “They’re

heading to your location.”

“Echo Team, this is Santiago,” he reported. “Confirm your approach.”

“Confirmed, we’re coming to you.” Eden’s voice came through immediately. “Two friendlies moving to your position.”

Santiago lowered his weapon as Nate and Eden emerged from the shadows, moving with quick, purposeful strides toward their position.

“Jenkins?” Eden asked, concern evident in her voice as she crouched beside her wounded teammate.

“I’ll live,” he replied weakly. “Thanks to our new doctor.”

“He needs evacuation,” Sabrina said, packing her medical supplies with efficient movements. “The bleeding’s controlled for now, but he needs blood products and proper surgical facilities to repair that artery permanently.”

“Evac team is five minutes out,” Nate reported, scanning the area. “We passed them on the highway.”

The gunfire from the direction of the Gulfstream had ceased, replaced by an ominous silence that made Sabrina’s stomach clench with dread. The aircraft’s engines were still running, their low rumble carrying across the airfield.

“Go,” Santiago urged from his position beside Jenkins. “We’ve got this.”

Sabrina hesitated only a moment before making her decision. “I’m coming with you,” she told Nate and Eden. “If they’ve breached the bioweapon’s containment, you’ll need me.”

“Reaper won’t like it,” Eden warned, though there was a glimmer of respect in her eyes.

“Reaper rarely likes sensible decisions that contradict his own,” Sabrina replied, checking the Glock at her hip. “He’ll have to learn to live with disappointment.”

A faint smile touched Eden’s lips. “I think I’m starting to like you, Doc.”

The three of them moved across the airfield, using the scattered maintenance equipment and fuel trucks for cover as they approached the Gulfstream. Eden coordinated their movements through comms, ensuring each team member’s position was known to all others as they advanced.

The aircraft sat on the tarmac, its engines idling, the boarding stairs still extended. Two bodies lay sprawled on the concrete nearby—Mitchell’s security personnel, Sabrina assumed, taken down by Atticus before they could complete the loading process.

“Alpha One, this is Echo Team on approach,” Nate reported through his comm. “Visual on Gulfstream. No movement. Confirm status.”

When no response came, Eden signaled for them to hold position while she tried again.

“Alpha One, Echo Team on approach. Atticus, do you copy?”

The continued silence was concerning. Nate raised his tactical scope, scanning the area methodically.

“No visual on Alpha One,” he reported, his voice tight with professional concern. “No visible movement inside the aircraft either.”



“Cypher,” Eden spoke into her comm. “Any satellite imagery on the Gulfstream?”

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“Thermal shows four heat signatures inside,” Cal replied. “One in the cockpit, three in the main cabin. Can’t distinguish friend from foe at this resolution.”

“We need to approach,” Nate decided, formulating a plan. He turned to Eden and said, “Circle to the rear access point. I’ll take the boarding stairs. Doc, maintain position here behind cover until we clear the aircraft. Maintain comms discipline and report any movement.”

Sabrina nodded, understanding this wasn’t the time to argue about positioning. Atticus was in there—possibly injured, possibly fighting for his life—and the bioweapon remained unsecured. The mission took priority over her pride.

“Copy that,” she replied, settling into her position with the focus she’d developed during her Navy service. “Be careful with the bioweapon container. If it’s compromised?—”

“We know,” Eden assured her. “Masks on before entry, no wild shots, secure the weapon first.”

Eden and Nate separated, each acknowledging their positions through comms as they moved toward their designated approach points. Sabrina maintained visual contact, her heart hammering against her ribs as she watched them close in on the aircraft.

The night air hung heavy with tension, the silence broken only by the steady hum of the aircraft’s engines and the distant wail of sirens that signaled the approach of the medical evacuation team.

Then chaos erupted once more.

A figure burst from the aircraft's doorway, colliding with Nate halfway up the boarding stairs. The two men grappled briefly before tumbling down the steps together, landing hard on the tarmac. Nate recovered first, rolling to his feet with the agility of a trained fighter, but his opponent was equally skilled, already countering with a vicious strike that would have incapacitated a lesser opponent.

Gunfire erupted from inside the aircraft—sharp, staccato bursts that told Sabrina the fight had expanded beyond the tarmac. Eden or Atticus engaging the remaining hostiles, she couldn't tell which.

Her medical instincts warred with tactical training as she remained in position. Every fiber of her being demanded she move closer, ready to provide assistance if needed, but she understood that becoming a liability now would only endanger the others.

The cockpit door of the Gulfstream flew open, and another figure emerged—a pilot, judging by the uniform, though the pistol in his hand suggested his duties extended beyond flying the aircraft. He took aim at the struggling figures on the tarmac, and without conscious thought, Sabrina raised her own weapon.

The shot echoed across the airfield, startling her despite having pulled the trigger herself. The pilot staggered, his weapon clattering to the ground as he clutched his shoulder. A flesh wound, her medical eye assessed automatically, sufficient to disable but not lethal.

Her moment of distraction cost her. A sharp crack from behind was her only warning before pain exploded across the back of her skull, driving her to her knees. Through suddenly blurred vision, she saw a dark figure looming over her—another of Mitchell's security personnel, one they hadn't accounted for.

“You’ve caused enough trouble,” he growled, raising his weapon for a killing shot.

The world narrowed to the barrel of his gun, time slowing to a nightmarish crawl as Sabrina stared death in the face. Her fingers scrabbled for her own weapon, but the blow to her head had left her disoriented, her movements clumsy and ineffective.

The crack of a single gunshot split the night.

The security operative’s expression morphed from cruel satisfaction to blank surprise before he crumpled to the ground beside her, a neat hole centered in his forehead.

Sabrina turned to see Atticus emerging from the side of the hangar, his weapon still raised, expression coldly lethal. Blood streaked one side of his face from a cut above his eye, and he moved with the slight stiffness that suggested injured ribs, but the steadiness of his aim never wavered.

“That’s the second time you’ve disobeyed a direct order,” he said, his voice low and controlled as he reached her side, helping her to her feet with his free hand. “Are you hurt?”

“Just my pride,” she replied, wincing as his fingers gently probed the back of her head, finding the lump where she’d been struck. “And maybe a mild concussion. You’re bleeding.”

“So are you.”

Their eyes met in the dim light, and something electric passed between them—relief, understanding, and an electric intensity that arced between their bodies. For a heartbeat, the chaos around them seemed to recede, leaving only this connection, this moment of recognition between two people who had faced death and emerged on the other side.

The moment shattered as Eden called out from the aircraft. “Reaper! We’ve secured the bioweapon, but you need to see this.”

Reality crashed back with brutal efficiency. Atticus’s hand dropped from her face, though he remained close, assessing her ability to stand on her own before moving toward the Gulfstream.

“Stay here,” he ordered, then paused, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly despite the tension. “Please.”

The unexpected courtesy startled a laugh from her, however brief. “Since you asked nicely.”

His eyes held hers for another beat before his expression shifted to resignation. “Who am I kidding? You need to see the bioweapon. Come on, but stay close.”

“That was my plan all along,” she replied, appreciating his pragmatism.

They moved toward the aircraft together, approaching just as Nate emerged from the shadows with a subdued prisoner. The man’s hands were secured behind his back with zip ties, his expression one of cold defiance despite his circumstances.

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“One of Mitchell’s top guys,” Nate explained, nodding toward his captive. “Isn’t that right, Jacobs? Maybe he’s got some useful information.”

“Bring him aboard,” Atticus directed. “If the bioweapon’s there, we’ll need everything he knows.”

Sabrina ascended the boarding stairs beside Atticus, her head throbbing with each step, but the pain remained manageable—a distraction rather than a disability.

The interior of the Gulfstream reflected Mitchell’s wealth and taste—plush leather seating, polished wood accents, and state-of-the-art technology seamlessly integrated into the cabin design. Two more of Mitchell’s men lay unconscious, expertly restrained by Eden, who was examining a reinforced containment unit secured in the aft section of the cabin.

“It’s intact,” she reported as Atticus approached. “But that’s not the problem.”

She gestured to a digital display on the side of the unit. Red numbers counted down steadily: 12:47...12:46...12:45...

“It’s on a timer,” Atticus said, his expression grim. “Set to release at the demonstration site.”

“Which is where?” Sabrina asked, moving to examine the containment unit despite the disapproving look Atticus shot her way.

“That’s what our friend here is going to tell us,” Nate said, shoving Mitchell’s

security chief into one of the leather seats. “Aren’t you, Jacobs?”

The man—Jacobs—glared up at them with cold defiance. “I don’t know anything about any demonstration site.”

“I think you do,” Atticus said, his voice deceptively soft as he approached Jacobs. There was something in his expression that made Sabrina’s blood run cold—a controlled fury that promised calculated violence rather than emotional outburst. “And you’re going to tell me, or I’m going to leave you handcuffed to that containment unit when the timer reaches zero.”

Jacobs paled visibly, his gaze darting to the countdown display. “You’re bluffing. You’d be exposed too.”

“We have countermeasures,” Atticus replied, the lie falling smoothly from his lips. “Do you?”

Sabrina studied the containment unit with growing concern. The timer was a problem, but not their most immediate one. “This is just a standard laboratory container,” she said, running her fingers along the seams. “It’s designed for transport, not deployment.”

“Meaning?” Eden prompted.

“Meaning it can’t actually release the bioweapon on its own,” Sabrina explained. “It would need to be connected to some kind of dispersal device—an aerosol system, most likely.”

“So Mitchell is waiting for this delivery at the demonstration site,” Atticus concluded. “Where he has the dispersal system already set up.”

“But the timer doesn’t make sense then,” Nate pointed out. “Why put a countdown on the container if it can’t release without the dispersal system?”

“Unless the timer isn’t for release,” Sabrina said slowly, a horrifying possibility dawning on her. “It’s for detonation. This isn’t just a containment unit—it’s a bomb designed to breach the bioweapon and create a localized event.”

“A fail-safe,” Atticus realized, his expression hardening. “If the delivery is intercepted, the bioweapon is still deployed, just on a smaller scale.”

“We need to disable it,” Eden said, already examining the container for access points. “Cypher, are you getting this?”

“Every word,” Cal confirmed through their comms. “But I can’t help with disarming without eyes on the device. You need to send me visuals.”

Eden extracted a small camera from her tactical vest, positioning it to capture the containment unit from multiple angles as the countdown continued relentlessly: 11:28...11:27...11:26...

“I need to get this open,” Sabrina said, retrieving specialized tools from her medical pack. “If I can isolate the bioweapon sample, we might be able to neutralize it before detonation.”

“And if you can’t?” Atticus asked, moving to stand beside her.

“Then we need to get this aircraft as far away from population centers as possible before the timer reaches zero,” she replied grimly. “Ideally over water, where the bioweapon would be diluted before it could spread.”

“That’s a last resort,” he said, his tone making it clear he had no intention of letting



her anywhere near the container when it detonated. “Our priority is disarming the device and securing the bioweapon.”

“Agreed,” she said, though they both understood the unspoken contingency—that someone might need to fly this aircraft out to sea if disarming failed. “Now stop hovering and let me work.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips, gone so quickly she might have imagined it. “Yes, ma’am.”

The medical evac team arrived as Sabrina carefully unsealed the outer container, their sirens cutting through the night before falling silent as they reached the airfield. Santiago would have Jenkins on his way to a proper medical facility within minutes, one worry off their collective shoulders.

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“Cypher,” Atticus spoke into his comm, “I need you to redirect all available assets to the airfield. Set up a containment perimeter, no one in or out without direct authorization.”

“Already on it,” Cal confirmed. “Local authorities have been given a cover story about a chemical spill. They’re maintaining distance while securing access points.”

“Good. And I want every available intel operative focused on locating Mitchell. He’s going to have contingencies beyond this one.”

“Working on that too. Mitchell’s still in his DC office according to our sources, maintaining his alibi. But he’s running this remotely—we’ve intercepted encrypted video conference signals to the demonstration site. His security chief, Reynolds, has been coordinating the ground operation. Mitchell’s too smart to be anywhere near a bioweapon release.”

Sabrina removed the final seal on the containment unit, exposing a complex mechanism surrounding a central vial of clear liquid—the bioweapon itself, innocuous in appearance but devastating in potential. Surrounding the vial was an intricate explosive device, wires connecting it to both a timer and what appeared to be a remote detonator.

“Cypher,” she said, studying the mechanism, “I’m looking at what appears to be a shaped charge designed to rupture the bioweapon vial and disperse its contents. The timer is connected, but there’s also what looks like a remote detonation receiver.”

“Mitchell’s insurance policy,” Atticus said grimly. “If we disarm the timer, he can still

trigger it remotely.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Cal replied, his typing audible through the comms. “Send me close-ups of that receiver. If it’s using standard frequencies, I might be able to jam the signal.”

“And if it’s not?” Eden asked, voicing the question they were all thinking.

“Then we’ve got ten minutes and seventeen seconds to figure out an alternative,” Cal replied. “But let’s focus on the positive, shall we?”

Sabrina exchanged a glance with Atticus, reading the same thought in his eyes that had occurred to her. They needed to remove the bioweapon from the explosive device—separate the weapon from the delivery system. It was their best chance of containing the threat.

“I need micro-forceps and a steady hand,” she said, already reaching for her medical kit. “The vial is secured within the explosive device, but there might be just enough clearance to extract it without triggering detonation.”

“That’s too risky,” Atticus objected. “One wrong move and?—”

“And we’re in the same position we’re in now,” she interrupted. “Look, I’ve got the steadiest hands on this aircraft. I’ve performed microsurgery under combat conditions. If anyone can extract that vial safely, it’s me.”

The seconds ticked by as Atticus weighed the options, his expression unreadable. Then he gave a sharp nod, decision made. “Do it. But everyone else evacuates to safe distance.”

“I’m staying,” Eden said immediately. “You’ll need someone to handle the explosives

while Doc focuses on the vial.”

“Both of you, go,” Atticus ordered, his tone brooking no argument. “Get Jacobs and the other prisoners clear of the area. Warlock, coordinate with the containment team on the ground. Doc and I will handle this.”

For a moment, it seemed Eden might argue further, but Nate placed a hand on her shoulder, a silent communication passing between them. With a reluctant nod, she moved to secure the prisoners for evacuation.

“Cypher,” Atticus continued, “I need constant updates on that signal jamming progress. And get me the location of Mitchell’s demonstration site. If this goes south, I want to know exactly where he planned to release this thing.”

“Working on both,” Cal confirmed. “But the encryption on these broadcasts is military grade. It’s going to take time.”

“Time we don’t have,” Atticus muttered, glancing at the countdown: 8:49... 8:48... 8:47...

The aircraft emptied quickly, leaving Sabrina and Atticus alone with the containment unit. She worked methodically, using the micro-forceps with the steadiness that had earned her commendations during her Navy service. The vial was held in place by a custom-designed cradle, surrounded by enough explosive material to ensure complete dispersal upon detonation.

“If I can disconnect these two wires,” she murmured, more to herself than to Atticus, “I might be able to create enough space to slide the vial out without disturbing the pressure sensors.”

“And if the pressure sensors trigger anyway?” he asked, watching her work with

focused intensity.

“Then we have approximately three seconds to say our goodbyes,” she replied, not looking up from her task. “Any particular last words you’ve been saving?”

“A few,” he admitted, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly despite the gravity of their situation. “But I’d prefer to save them for a less terminal occasion.”

“Then let’s make sure we get that occasion,” she said, carefully manipulating the first wire free from its connection point. It detached with a faint click that made them both hold their breath, but the timer continued its countdown uninterrupted: 7:12... 7:11... 7:10...

“One down, one to go,” she murmured, shifting her position slightly to access the second wire. This one was more deeply embedded in the mechanism, requiring her to maneuver the forceps at an awkward angle. Sweat beaded on her forehead, but her hands remained steady, testament to years of training and an innate gift for delicate work under pressure.

“That’s it,” she breathed as the second wire came free. “Now for the extraction.”

With painstaking care, she guided the forceps around the vial, securing a grip on the glass container without applying enough pressure to crack it. The clearance was minimal, requiring her to ease the vial upward by millimeters, avoiding contact with the surrounding explosives.

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“Cypher,” Atticus spoke softly, as if afraid his voice might disturb Sabrina’s concentration. “Status on the jamming?”

“Almost there,” Cal replied. “I’ve isolated the frequency, but the encryption is giving me trouble. Three more minutes, maybe four.”

The vial slid upward, fraction by agonizing fraction, until it cleared the top of the explosive cradle. Sabrina exhaled slowly, not realizing she’d been holding her breath.

“Got it,” she said, carefully transferring the vial to a secure container from her medical pack. “Bioweapon secured.”

“Good work,” Atticus said, his relief evident despite his controlled tone. “Now let’s get off this aircraft and let the explosive disposal team handle the rest.”

The timer continued its countdown: 5:23...5:22...5:21...

They moved toward the exit, Sabrina cradling the secured bioweapon against her chest like the lethal treasure it was. The containment team had established a perimeter around the aircraft, emergency vehicles positioned at strategic intervals around the airfield.

Just as they reached the boarding stairs, Cal’s voice came through the comms, tense with alarm. “Reaper, we’ve got a problem. Mitchell’s security team is converging on your position. We’re picking up increased encrypted communications between Mitchell’s DC office and the airfield. He knows you’re there.”

“The jamming?” Atticus demanded, his hand automatically going to Sabrina’s back, urging her down the stairs faster.

“Ninety seconds from completion,” Cal replied. “But we’ve intercepted a remote detonation command in the encrypted stream. He’s going to blow it now!”

“Everyone clear the area!” Atticus ordered through the comms. “Remote detonation imminent. Fall back to secondary containment positions. Viper, Frost—get your teams to minimum safe distance. Extraction teams, accelerate timeline for the rest of Alpha.”

Atticus grabbed Sabrina’s arm, pulling her into a sprint away from the aircraft. “We need at least two hundred yards of distance!”

They raced across the tarmac, the bioweapon container clutched tightly against Sabrina’s chest. Nate and Eden ran parallel to them, dragging Jacobs with them. They’d barely made it behind the solid concrete wall of a maintenance hangar when the sky was torn apart by a blinding flash and a deafening concussion.

The Gulfstream disintegrated in a massive fireball, the explosion so powerful it shook the ground beneath their feet. A mushroom cloud of flame and black smoke rose into the night sky as burning debris rained down across the airfield. The heat wave rolled over the hangar wall, hot enough to singe hair and eyebrows even from their protected position.

“Down!” Atticus shouted, pulling Sabrina to the ground as a secondary explosion sent a piece of the aircraft’s wing cartwheeling through the air over their heads, crashing into a fuel truck fifty yards beyond them.

For several heartbeats, they lay huddled against the hangar wall, ears ringing from the explosion, the acrid smell of jet fuel and burning metal filling their nostrils. Atticus had thrown himself partially over Sabrina, shielding her from falling debris, his body

tense and alert for further danger.

For several heartbeats, they lay still, ears ringing from the explosion, the weight of Atticus's body both protective and intimate against hers. Then he was moving, rolling off her to assess the situation while maintaining physical contact, his hand on her shoulder.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his voice slightly muffled through the lingering effects of the blast.

"I don't think so," she replied, though her entire body felt bruised from the impact. She immediately checked the secure container, relief flooding through her when she confirmed it remained intact. "The bioweapon is contained."

Atticus helped her to her feet, steadying her when she swayed slightly. The airfield had transformed into a scene from hell—flames leaping skyward from the remnants of the aircraft, black smoke billowing into the night. Emergency crews were already moving in with fire suppression equipment, their voices carrying over the chaos.

"Mitchell," Atticus said, his expression darkening as he scanned the perimeter. "He knew we'd intercepted the bioweapon. He triggered the detonation remotely rather than risk us securing it."

"But we did secure it," Sabrina said, holding up the container. "He failed."

A grim smile touched Atticus's lips. "Not completely. He just destroyed millions of dollars' worth of evidence. And he's still out there, presumably with more of this weapon at the demonstration site."

Nate and Eden were approaching through the smoke, tactical masks in place, weapons ready.



“That was too close,” Eden said, eyeing the burning wreckage. “You two okay?”

“We got the bioweapon out just in time,” Atticus confirmed. “How’s Jenkins?”

“Stable, en route to Dynamis medical,” Nate replied. “Santiago’s with him.”

“Cypher,” Atticus spoke into his comm once they’d confirmed everyone was accounted for, “tell me you got something from that detonation signal.”

“Better than that,” Cal replied, satisfaction evident in his voice despite the circumstances. “The remote detonation was routed through Mitchell’s encrypted network, but the receiving station is at a privately owned property fifty miles northwest of Dallas. That’s where they’re setting up the demonstration. And guess what we found when we pulled the ownership records?”

“A shell company linked to Mitchell,” Atticus guessed.

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“Bingo.Ownership traces back through three shell corporations to a foundation chaired by Mitchell’s wife.It’s the demonstration site.Satellite imagery shows a compound with a central building and what appears to be an observation platform.Multiple vehicles arriving within the last hour.”

“The buyers,” Eden said grimly. “They must be proceeding with the demonstration.”

“Without the primary sample,” Sabrina pointed out, holding up the contained bioweapon.

“Mitchell wouldn’t risk everything on one sample,” Atticus said. “A man like that always has contingencies.The question is whether their backup samples are as refined as this one.”

“Only one way to find out,” Nate said, checking his weapon. “We need to hit the demonstration site before Reynolds and his team can deploy whatever they have left.”

Atticus nodded, decision made. “Cyph, have Merlin prepped for aerial insertion.I want a full tactical team ready for deployment in fifteen minutes.Send the coordinates directly to our tactical systems.”

“Copy that,” Cal confirmed. “What about you?”

“We’re heading there now,” Atticus replied. “Ground approach, maximum stealth.Have the aerosol countermeasure ready for deployment if necessary.”

Sabrina felt a surge of pride at his reference to her creation—the untested, theoretical

solution that might be their only defense if Mitchell's remaining bioweapon samples were deployed at the demonstration site.

Atticus surveyed the burning wreckage, then turned to his team. "Eden, secure the bioweapon sample at Dynamis. We need it safely contained and analyzed further."

Eden nodded, accepting the container from Sabrina.

"Warlock," Atticus continued, "coordinate with Merlin's aerial team. I want comprehensive coverage of that demonstration site before we move in."

"Copy that," Nate replied, already on his comm to Griffin.

Atticus turned to Sabrina, his expression professional but no longer dismissive. "Doc, you're with me. Your expertise on the bioweapon will be critical if they're planning to deploy at the demonstration site. But understand this—in the field, my orders aren't suggestions. If you can't follow them, you stay behind. Lives depend on it."

Sabrina met his gaze unflinchingly. "Understood. I'm not here to undermine your authority. I'm here because people will die if that weapon deploys without a countermeasure ready."

Something shifted in his expression—acknowledgment of her capabilities mixed with the burden of command responsibility. "Then gear up. We move in five minutes. I'll need everything you know about this weapon's deployment requirements and vulnerabilities on the drive over."

"Already compiling a list," she replied, professional to professional.

Eden accepted the container with reverent care, aware of both its scientific value and its lethal potential. "I'll make sure Cypher's team has what they need to synthesize

more countermeasure.”

“Time’s wasting,” Nate pointed out, already moving toward their remaining vehicle. “Mitchell’s security team has at least a thirty-minute head start on setting up the demonstration.”

Sabrina checked her watch. Less than forty minutes until Mitchell’s scheduled demonstration. The race was on, and the stakes couldn’t be higher.

In the back seat of the SUV, she found herself beside Atticus, the narrow space forcing them closer than was professionally necessary. The adrenaline of the day’s events still coursed through her veins, heightening every sensation—the warmth of his arm pressed against hers, the faint scent of smoke clinging to both their clothing, the measured rhythm of his breathing despite the tension evident in his posture.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, her voice pitched low enough that only he could hear.

He glanced at her, surprise evident in his expression. “For what?”

“Trusting me,” she replied simply. “With the bioweapon extraction. With your team. With this mission.”

Something shifted in his gaze, the professional mask slipping just enough to reveal the man beneath—the man who’d promised later with a look that made her heart race, who’d shielded her body with his own during the explosion without hesitation.

“You’ve earned it,” he said, his voice equally low. His hand found hers in the darkness between them, fingers intertwining briefly before releasing. The touch lasted only seconds, but the promise it contained sustained her as they drove toward what might be their most dangerous confrontation yet.

Mitchell was waiting, and he still had the power to unleash devastation. But for the first time since this mission began, Sabrina felt certain they would stop him. Not because of Dynamis's resources or Atticus's tactical brilliance, though both were formidable, but because of what they'd forged between them all—a team unified by purpose, strengthened by trust, and driven by the determination that some lines should never be crossed.

The bioweapon would never reach the market. Mitchell would face justice for Jane's murder. And perhaps, when it was over, there would finally be time for that conversation Atticus had promised—the one that had nothing to do with missions and everything to do with beginnings.

As the road stretched out before them, Sabrina found herself studying Atticus's profile. The hard lines of his face, softened slightly by exhaustion. The shadow of stubble along his jaw. The watchful intensity in his eyes that never fully disappeared, even in moments of relative calm.

She wondered what Jane had seen when she'd looked at him. Not just the commanding presence or the tactical brilliance, but the man beneath—the one capable of fierce loyalty and unexpected tenderness. The one who'd raised a daughter alone while building an empire dedicated to one purpose: justice.

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“What?” Atticus asked, feeling her gaze.

“Just wondering what I’ve gotten myself into,” she replied, offering a small smile to soften the words.

“Having second thoughts?” There was no judgment in his tone, only genuine curiosity.

“Not a chance.” The certainty in her voice surprised even her. “I’m exactly where I need to be.”

Something flickered in his eyes—a warmth that transformed his features, revealing a glimpse of the man he might have been before loss had carved its permanent mark. “Yes,” he said quietly. “You are.”

The simple affirmation settled between them like a promise as they drove through the darkness toward confrontation. Whatever came next—whatever dangers awaited at the demonstration site—they would face them together.

### Chapter Fourteen

The security convoy moved along the private access road, three armored SUVs in formation like predators hunting as a pack. Inside the lead vehicle, Reynolds—Mitchell’s head of security—watched the demonstration site materialize through bulletproof glass. The central compound sprawled across fifty acres of isolated terrain, surrounded by outbuildings and a small landing pad where two helicopters sat with rotors still. The afternoon air shimmered with heat, the scorching

Texas summer unforgiving.

Fifty miles away, Senator Warren Mitchell adjusted the massive display screens in his private study, each one showing different angles of the demonstration site. His fingers tapped impatiently against the mahogany desk as he watched his vision becoming reality—all while maintaining perfect deniability through his physical absence.

Half a mile from the compound, concealed behind natural terrain and specialized camouflage, Sabrina counted at least fifteen vehicles already on site—sleek European sedans and armored SUVs that screamed wealth and power. Mitchell's buyers had arrived in force.

“They’re not even trying to be discreet,” Nate murmured, lowering his tactical binoculars. “International arms dealers, gathered in broad daylight.”

“They don’t need discretion when they have Mitchell’s protection,” Atticus replied, his voice tight with focused anger. Eight years of hunting had led to this moment—the culmination of a quest that had consumed his life since Jane’s murder. “And they’re on private property, miles from any witnesses.”

“Local law enforcement status?” Nate asked.

“Contained,” Cal confirmed through comms. “Captain Rivera at Dallas PD has three units maintaining a perimeter at the county line with a hazmat training exercise cover story. Sheriff’s department is on standby for civilian evacuation assistance only—Director Hargrove owes Max a favor from the Caracas operation. They’ve both been fed selective intel—enough to keep their people clear without compromising our operation.”

“Having friends in the right places,” Nate commented with a slight smile.

“Dynamis doesn’t have friends,” Atticus corrected, though without heat. “We have tactical alliances with people smart enough to recognize when to look the other way.”

Cal’s voice came through their comms, the background hum of Dynamis command center audible beneath his words. “Satellite thermal imaging shows twenty-eight heat signatures in the main building, another twelve spread across the grounds. Heavy security presence at all access points. Mitchell’s security chief Reynolds must have called in reinforcements after the airfield.”

“Or this was always the plan,” Eden countered, checking her weapon. “An event this high-profile would have contingency teams ready regardless.”

Sabrina scanned the compound through the specialized optics Atticus had provided. The central building—a converted ranch house with modern additions—featured floor-to-ceiling windows along one side, offering occupants a clear view of what appeared to be a demonstration area. A raised platform stood one hundred yards from the building, surrounded by scientific equipment and what looked disturbingly like medical monitoring stations.

“The deployment system,” she said, pointing to a metallic apparatus at the center of the platform. “Designed for aerosol dispersal. Similar to what we saw in the decoy transport.” Her stomach clenched at the implications. “They’re planning to demonstrate on live subjects.”

Atticus followed her gaze, his expression hardening into something cold and lethal. “Hostages?”

“More likely unwitting test subjects,” she replied grimly. “The community that was in the evacuation zone—have they all been accounted for?”

“The evacuation teams reported twelve residents still unaccounted for,” Cal



confirmed. “Local sheriff’s department is conducting door-to-door verification, but they’re stretched thin with our cover story about the chemical spill.”

Atticus’s jaw tightened, muscle jumping beneath skin tanned by years of field operations. “They’re going to use civilians to demonstrate the weapon’s effectiveness. Maximum impact for potential buyers.”

The brutal calculus made Sabrina’s blood run cold. She’d spent her entire career saving lives, and the thought of people being used as disposable test subjects for a weapon of mass destruction violated everything she believed in.

“I count four guards on the west approach,” Jade reported through comms, her voice steady despite the dire circumstances. “Standard patrol pattern, ninety-second intervals between checkpoints.”

“East side has a blind spot between the equipment shed and the tree line,” Max added. “Gives us a narrow window, but it’s viable.”

Atticus absorbed the information with the focused intensity of a commander weighing tactical options against time constraints. Dawn’s light worked against them, eliminating the cover of darkness, but waiting for nightfall wasn’t an option—not with lives at stake and Mitchell’s demonstration already underway.

“Merlin’s aerial team is in position,” Cal reported. “Five minutes out, awaiting your signal.”

“Hold them in reserve,” Atticus decided. “We’ll use them for extraction and containment. I want primary infiltration to maintain stealth as long as possible.” He turned to his core team, expression resolute. “Priority one is neutralizing the bioweapon deployment system. Priority two is securing any additional samples. Priority three is taking Mitchell’s operation intact with evidence connecting

him to everything.”

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“And the hostages?” Sabrina asked, though she already knew his answer.

“Above all else,” he confirmed, his gaze meeting hers with an intensity that spoke of shared values despite their different paths to this moment. “No acceptable losses.”

He outlined the infiltration plan with the directness of someone who’d orchestrated hundreds of tactical operations. Nate and Eden would approach from the east, using the blind spot Max had identified to gain access to the main building. Max and Jade would take western positions, providing sniper coverage and creating a diversion when needed. Griffin’s aerial team would maintain holding patterns just beyond detection range, ready to deploy the moment stealth was compromised.

“Doc and I will target the deployment platform directly,” Atticus concluded. “Her expertise with the bioweapon is our best chance of neutralizing it safely.”

The assignment surprised her—not the task itself, which made tactical sense, but Atticus’s apparent acceptance of her presence in the most dangerous role. Their eyes met, a silent communication passing between them that acknowledged both professional respect and something far more personal.

“The aerosol countermeasure?” she asked, shifting focus to the mission parameters.

“Here,” Nate said, passing her a reinforced container. “Synthesized according to your specifications. Untested, but it’s the best we’ve got.”

She nodded, accepting the weight of both the container and the responsibility it represented. “It should work in theory. The molecular structure is designed to bind

with the bioweapon before it can attach to human tissue.”

“Theory is about to become practice,” Eden observed, checking her watch. “According to Reynolds’s intel, the demonstration is scheduled for 1400 hours.”

“Then we move now,” Atticus said. “All teams, final comms check and sync tactical displays.”

The Dynamis team moved with seamless coordination, each operator configuring equipment, checking weapons, and synchronizing communications. Sabrina found herself at the center of this lethal choreography, her medical background an unexpected complement to their tactical expertise.

Atticus approached as she adjusted her tactical vest, his expression softening slightly as he helped secure a strap she’d missed. The brief contact sent awareness cascading through her system despite the life-or-death circumstances awaiting them.

“Stay close to me,” he said, his voice pitched low enough that only she could hear. “These aren’t hospital corridors or research labs.”

“I know,” she replied, meeting his gaze directly. “They’re more like the combat zones where I served. I won’t slow you down.”

Something flickered in his eyes—respect, concern, and beneath it all, the banked fire of attraction neither of them had time to explore. His fingers lingered at her shoulder a moment longer than necessary before dropping away.

“I know you won’t,” he acknowledged, his voice rough with emotions he kept carefully leashed. “Just remember?—”

“Your orders aren’t suggestions,” she finished, the ghost of a smile touching her lips despite the tension thrumming through her. “I remember.”

The moment stretched between them, charged with possibilities neither could afford to consider. Then Atticus was stepping back, the commander reasserting control over the man, his expression shifting to tactical assessment.

“Let’s move,” he said, addressing the team. “Comms discipline from this point forward. Mission clock starts now.”

They separated into their assigned teams, Nate and Eden disappearing into the tree line with the silent grace of predators hunting in their natural environment. Max and Jade moved toward their sniper positions, carrying specialized equipment that would allow them to neutralize threats from extraordinary distances if necessary.

Sabrina followed Atticus toward the southern approach, where a drainage culvert offered access to the demonstration area with minimal exposure. They moved in silence, Sabrina matching his pace with the focused determination that had defined her military service and surgical career. The weight of the aerosol countermeasure against her back reminded her of exactly what was at stake—not just the lives that might be lost today, but the thousands more that would perish if Mitchell’s bioweapon reached the international market.

The drainage culvert smelled of stagnant water and rusted metal, the confined space forcing them into a crouching position that strained muscles already taxed by the night’s events. Atticus moved ahead of her, checking each junction before signaling her forward, his movements economical and precise.

“Patrols every sixty seconds,” he murmured, pausing at a junction where the culvert intersected with a larger drainage channel. “Motion sensor ahead, ten o’clock.”

Sabrina spotted the small device attached to the culvert's ceiling—easy to miss if you weren't trained to look for it. Atticus extracted a specialized tool from his tactical vest, extending it toward the sensor with controlled movements.

“Neutralized,” he confirmed after a moment, the tiny light on the device shifting from red to green as his countermeasure worked. “Temporary bypass. We have three minutes before the system resets and registers the anomaly.”

They emerged from the culvert into the gray light of early morning, immediately taking cover behind a stack of construction materials near the demonstration platform. The compound had come alive with activity, security personnel in tactical gear establishing a perimeter while technicians made final adjustments to the demonstration equipment.

Through her specialized optics, Sabrina could see inside the main building, where well-dressed men and women gathered near the windows, champagne flutes in hand as they observed the preparations with the casual interest of consumers evaluating a product. The disconnect between their cocktail-party demeanor and the lethal purpose of their gathering turned her stomach.

“Visual confirmation on primary targets,” Cal reported through comms, his voice pitched low despite the secure channel. “Executive from Yongsan Defense Initiatives, North Korean front. Representative from VectorScope, tied to Russian bioweapons research. CFO of Schwarztech, German arms manufacturer with known terrorist connections. Plus six other high-priority targets on international watch lists.”

“Mitchell's Christmas list,” Max commented from his position. “All the naughty children in one place.”

“Any sign of Mitchell himself?” Atticus asked, scanning the gathered buyers.

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“Negative,” Cal replied. “But we’re picking up a secure video feed being broadcast to the main building. He’s running this remotely, as expected.”

Sabrina’s attention shifted to the demonstration platform, where technicians in hazmat suits were making final adjustments to the dispersal system. Beside the platform, a windowless van had arrived, its rear doors opening to reveal what looked like medical transport stretchers.

“They’re bringing in the test subjects,” she said, dread pooling in her stomach as figures in lab coats emerged from the van. “We need to move now.”

“Not yet,” Atticus cautioned, though she could feel the tension radiating from him. “Wait for?—”

“Alpha Team in position,” Nate’s voice came through the comms, followed immediately by Eden’s confirmation. “East access secured.”

“Bravo Team ready,” Jade reported. “I have eyes on the primary deployment system. Four technicians, two security personnel. Clean shots available on command.”

“Hold positions,” Atticus ordered. “We need to assess the bioweapon before engagement. Doc?”

Sabrina studied the deployment system through her optics, analyzing the components with the experienced eye of someone who’d dedicated her life to understanding how things worked—whether human bodies or mechanical systems.

“Central cannister is the primary deployment unit,” she identified. “Based on the configuration, it’s designed for aerosol dispersal with a coverage radius of approximately one hundred meters. The smaller cylinders are likely backup samples or calibration controls.”

“Can we disable it from here?” Atticus asked.

She shook her head. “Not without risking accidental deployment. We need direct access to the control systems.”

“Reynolds just arrived,” Max reported. “Southeast entrance, with four security personnel. He’s carrying what looks like a reinforced case—similar to what we saw at the airfield.”

“The primary bioweapon sample,” Atticus concluded. “Mitchell’s not putting all his eggs in one basket after the airfield loss.”

“They’re moving the test subjects into position,” Eden added urgently. “Five individuals, civilian clothing, appear to be sedated or drugged. One elderly male, two middle-aged females, one younger male and one younger female.”

Sabrina’s heart clenched. Five innocent lives, selected for slaughter to demonstrate a weapon’s effectiveness. Everything in her rebelled against the calculation, the cold disregard for human dignity.

“We need to move now,” she said, already reaching for the aerosol countermeasure.

Atticus nodded, decision made. “All teams, execute infiltration. Jade, on my mark, neutralize the security personnel at the platform. Viper, create a diversion at the west perimeter on my command. Warlock, Nightshade, secure the civilians. Doc and I will neutralize the bioweapon.”



The Dynamis team acknowledged their orders with professional efficiency. Atticus turned to Sabrina, his expression grim but determined.

“Remember, if something goes wrong, the countermeasure is the priority,” he said. “Those five lives represent thousands more if that weapon reaches the market.”

“I know,” she replied, though the words tasted bitter. “But we’re going to save them all, Atticus. That’s what we do.”

Something flickered in his eyes. His hand found hers briefly, a warm pressure that conveyed more than words could express.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready,” she confirmed, tightening her grip on the countermeasure container.

“All teams, execute on my mark,” Atticus said, his voice steady with lethal purpose. “Three, two, one...mark.”

The world erupted into controlled chaos. Two sharp cracks split the air as Jade eliminated the security personnel at the deployment platform, each shot finding its mark with lethal finality. Simultaneously, an explosion rocked the western perimeter as Max’s diversion drew attention and resources away from their primary target.

Atticus and Sabrina sprinted toward the deployment platform, using the momentary confusion to cross the exposed ground between their position and the bioweapon. The technicians scattered in panic, abandoning their equipment as gunfire erupted across the compound.

They reached the platform just as Reynolds turned in their direction, recognition and alarm flashing across his face. He reached for his weapon, but Atticus was faster, a

single shot striking center mass. Mitchell's security chief dropped to the ground, the threat permanently neutralized.

"Secure the case," Atticus ordered, gesturing toward the reinforced container Reynolds had been carrying. "I'll handle the deployment system."

Sabrina moved toward the case, keeping low as bullets ricocheted off the platform's metal supports. Inside the main building, the assembled buyers were scattering, their casual interest in weapons of mass destruction replaced by the very real fear of becoming casualties themselves.

"East side secure," Nate reported. "Civilians located and confirmed alive. Moving to extraction point alpha."

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“West perimeter compromised,” Max added. “Security forces redirecting to the main building. You’ve got about ninety seconds before reinforcements reach your position.”

Sabrina reached the case, carefully examining it for booby traps before attempting to open it. No obvious triggers or alarms, but the digital lock would require bypassing.

“Cypher,” she said into her comm, “I need remote access to a biometric security system. Standard BioGenix protocols.”

“On it,” Cal replied. “Transmitting bypass sequence to your tactical display...now.”

The sequence appeared on her heads-up display, a complex pattern of override codes that she immediately began inputting into the case’s security panel. Across the platform, Atticus was dismantling the deployment system with the efficiency of someone who had studied its schematics extensively.

“Security forces converging on your position,” Eden warned. “Thirty seconds max.”

The case’s lock disengaged with a soft click, the panel flashing green. Sabrina opened it carefully, revealing six vials of clear liquid nestled in custom-molded foam—each one containing enough of the bioweapon to devastate a small city.

“Primary samples secured,” she reported, transferring the vials to her specialized containment pack with the careful precision of someone handling nitroglycerine. “Moving to assist with the deployment system.”

She joined Atticus at the central console, where he had removed the access panel to expose the inner workings of the dispersal mechanism. Red and yellow wires connected a central processor to the delivery tubes, the entire system designed for maximum lethality with minimal warning.

“The dispersal mechanism is armed,” he said, voice tight with concentration. “Timer set for three minutes. Mitchell’s fail-safe—if the demonstration is compromised, the system deploys automatically.”

“Can you disarm it?” she asked, studying the complex wiring.

“Not in time,” he replied grimly. “The system’s designed with multiple redundancies. Cut one wire, and it accelerates the countdown.”

Sabrina processed this information with the rapid assessment skills honed during countless trauma surgeries. “Then we neutralize it another way. The aerosol countermeasure—if we can introduce it directly into the dispersal system before detonation, it might render the bioweapon inert before deployment.”

Atticus considered this for less than a second before nodding. “Do it.”

She extracted the aerosol countermeasure from her pack, analyzing the deployment system’s intake valves to identify the optimal injection point. The untested formula represented their best hope—a theoretical solution to a weapon designed for mass casualties.

“Fifteen seconds to reinforcement arrival,” Max warned. “You need to move!”

“Almost there,” Sabrina replied, connecting the countermeasure container to the deployment system’s primary intake. She engaged the transfer mechanism, watching as the clear liquid flowed into the bioweapon’s delivery system. “Countermeasure

deployed.Theoretical neutralization in progress.”

“Time to go,” Atticus said, already securing their retreat path.“We’ve got what we came for.”

But as they turned to leave, the platform’s edge erupted in a hail of gunfire.Mitchell’s reinforcements had arrived—a full tactical team in body armor, weapons trained on their position.

“Down!”Atticus shouted, tackling Sabrina behind the minimal cover of the deployment system’s base.Bullets pinged off metal and concrete around them, sharp whines punctuating each impact.

“Frost, we need cover fire,” Atticus ordered through comms.“What’s your position?”

“Engaging from the northwest,” Jade confirmed, precise shots picking off Mitchell’s security team one by one.“But I’ve got movement on my six—can’t maintain position.”

“South perimeter compromised,” Max added, his voice tight with focused intensity.“Reinforcements cutting off your primary exit route.Merlin’s team is engaging, but we’re outnumbered.”

Sabrina’s mind raced, assessing options with the cool logic that had served her through battlefield medicine and high-pressure surgeries.The deployment system’s countdown continued relentlessly—two minutes remaining until detonation, whether the countermeasure worked or not.

“We need to create distance from this platform,” she said.“If the countermeasure fails?—”

“It won’t,” Atticus replied, though they both knew the uncertainty that haunted untested solutions. His eyes met hers, determination blazing through the tactical calculation. “Alternative exit route?”

She scanned their surroundings, identifying a maintenance vehicle parked twenty yards north of their position. “There. If we can reach it?—”

“I’ll cover you,” he decided, checking his ammunition. “On my mark, run for the vehicle. Don’t stop, don’t look back. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Together,” she countered, unwilling to leave him exposed. “Or not at all.”

A flicker of something crossed his face—frustration mingled with reluctant admiration. “Stubborn woman,” he muttered, though there was no heat in the words.

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“Determined,” she corrected with the ghost of a smile.

Their moment of connection shattered as a new barrage of gunfire erupted around them. Through her tactical display, Sabrina saw Griffin’s team engaging from the eastern approach, creating a potential corridor for their escape.

“Move now,” Atticus ordered, rising to provide covering fire as they sprinted toward the maintenance vehicle.

Bullets kicked up dirt around their feet as they ran, the exposed ground between the platform and their destination stretching endlessly before them. Sabrina pushed herself harder, legs burning with the effort, lungs straining against the brutal pace.

They reached the vehicle just as a bullet impacted Atticus’s tactical vest, the force spinning him sideways. He staggered but maintained his footing, returning fire with deadly aim despite the hit.

“Are you hit?” Sabrina demanded, already assessing for injury with professional detachment.

“Vest caught it,” he confirmed, though his breathing had roughened. “Get in. I’ll drive.”

The maintenance vehicle roared to life as Atticus hot-wired it, the aged engine protesting before catching. They accelerated away from the platform just as Mitchell’s security forces converged on their former position, bullets pinging off the vehicle’s metal frame.

“All teams, fall back to extraction points,” Atticus ordered through comms. “Mission objectives secured. Merlin, status on the civilians?”

“All five extracted safely,” Griffin confirmed. “Minor injuries but stable. Evacuation helicopters inbound.”

Relief washed through Sabrina, momentarily overshadowing their still-precarious position. “The bioweapon samples?”

“Secured,” Atticus confirmed, navigating the vehicle across rough terrain with one hand while maintaining suppressive fire with the other. “Your countermeasure will determine whether the deployment system is neutralized or not.”

Behind them, the platform remained intact, the countdown nearly complete. Mitchell’s security forces had established a perimeter around it, uncertain whether to abandon the position or maintain control of the asset despite the infiltration.

“Thirty seconds to deployment system activation,” Cal reported through comms. “All teams confirm safe distance.”

Sabrina watched through the rear window as the seconds ticked down, her heart hammering against her ribs. Everything depended on the countermeasure working—on theoretical science becoming practical salvation.

“Fifteen seconds,” Cal continued. “Fourteen, thirteen...”

Atticus pushed the maintenance vehicle to its limits, engine shrieking in protest as they put distance between themselves and the platform. His expression remained focused, but she felt the tension radiating from him—the heaviness of potential failure neither of them could afford.



“Five, four, three, two, one...deployment.”

The platform’s central mechanism activated with a soft hiss rather than the explosive force they’d feared. A fine mist sprayed from the dispersal nozzles, hanging in the air like morning fog before gradually dissipating.

“Countermeasure appears to be functioning,” Cal reported, monitoring satellite imagery of the thermal signatures. “No immediate casualty indicators within the deployment radius.”

“It worked,” Sabrina breathed, relief flooding through her system with dizzying intensity. “The bioweapon was neutralized.”

Atticus’s expression remained guarded, years of experience having taught him to distrust easy victories. “Preliminary result only. We’ll need to secure the area and run contamination tests to confirm.”

“Always the optimist,” she teased, though she understood his caution.

The ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Realist,” he corrected. “Though I’m learning to appreciate the alternative perspective.”

Their eyes met again, the connection between them deepening despite—or perhaps because of—the danger they’d faced together. In the heat of combat, pretenses fell away, leaving only truth: They worked well together, trusted each other’s judgment, and felt something neither was ready to name but both were increasingly unwilling to deny.

“All teams report,” Atticus said, redirecting focus to the mission as they approached the extraction point where Dynamis helicopters waited with rotors turning. “Casualties and status.”

“Alpha Team clear,” Nate confirmed. “Two minor injuries. All civilians secured and en route to medical evaluation.”

“Bravo Team extracting now,” Jade added. “Viper took a graze to the left arm. Nothing critical.”

“Griffin’s team reports three wounded, none critical,” Cal summarized. “And we’ve got a bigger win than you realize. The buyers scattered when the shooting started, but we’ve coordinated with federal authorities who have intercepted four of the nine at temporary roadblocks. Homeland Security and FBI teams are taking custody due to the international terrorism implications. The others won’t get far—we’ve forwarded their identities and transport details to the Joint Terrorism Task Force.”

“And Mitchell?” Atticus asked.

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A pause, then Cal's voice returned, a note of satisfaction evident despite his professional tone. "We've traced the video feed. He's broadcasting from his secure office in Washington DC, just as we thought. But here's the interesting part—our intelligence shows he's carrying on with his normal schedule. He has a fundraising dinner tonight and committee hearings tomorrow morning. He's acting like nothing happened, like his operation wasn't just dismantled."

"Of course he is," Atticus said, his voice hardening with cold fury. "Men like him believe the law doesn't apply to them. He thinks his position protects him, that he's untouchable even after we've secured the evidence."

"The arrogance is unbelievable," Nate muttered. "His buyers are being detained by federal agencies, his bioweapon is neutralized, and he's attending a black-tie fundraiser?"

"That's what makes him dangerous," Sabrina observed. "He truly believes nothing can touch him."

Something shifted in Atticus's expression—a predator sensing its quarry after a long hunt. "Redirect our extraction to D.C.," he ordered, a new intensity hardening his voice. "It's time Senator Mitchell learned that no one is beyond justice. Not even him."

"Atticus," Eden cautioned through comms, "we've secured the bioweapon and the evidence connecting Mitchell to its development. The legal case is solid."

"This isn't about legal cases," he replied, the cold determination in his voice sending a shiver down Sabrina's spine. "This is about Jane."

“And Anna,” Nate added, understanding evident in his tone. “You need to finish this face-to-face.”

“Yes,” Atticus confirmed simply.

Sabrina studied his profile as they approached the extraction helicopters, noting the rigid set of his jaw, the focused intensity that had returned to his eyes. The mission had succeeded beyond their expectations—bioweapon secured, evidence collected, lives saved—but for Atticus, the most important confrontation still awaited.

Eight years of hunting, of channeling grief into purpose, had led to this moment. Mitchell’s carefully constructed protection had finally crumbled, leaving him exposed and vulnerable.

As they boarded the helicopter that would take them to the airfield where Dynamis’s private jet waited, Sabrina felt the weight of what was to come. This wasn’t just the culmination of a mission, but the potential resolution of a personal vendetta that had defined Atticus’s existence since losing Jane.

The question that hung between them, unspoken but undeniable, was what would remain when vengeance was finally satisfied. What would fill the space that pursuit and purpose had occupied for so long?

Atticus’s hand found hers in the dim interior of the helicopter, warm and steady despite the tension thrumming through him. His fingers intertwined with hers, a silent acknowledgment of connection that went beyond professional partnership.

“Ready?” she asked, the question encompassing far more than their immediate mission.

“Yes,” he replied, his voice certain despite the complexity of emotions behind it. “For

everything that comes next.”

The helicopter lifted off, rotors slicing through the morning air as they left the demonstration site behind. Below them, emergency vehicles converged on the compound, the remnants of Mitchell’s operation being systematically dismantled by authorities tipped off by Dynamis intelligence.

As the airfield appeared on the horizon, the Texas landscape stretching endlessly beneath them, Sabrina felt something shift inside her chest. One chapter ending, another beginning—for Atticus, for herself, and perhaps for them together, if they chose that path.

Whatever awaited in Washington, she would face it beside him—not as a temporary ally, but as a partner who understood both the professional demands of their work and the personal complexities of the man behind the mission.

His fingers tightened around hers, and when he turned to meet her gaze, she saw something new in his eyes—not just determination or vengeance or even desire, but a future. Uncertain, unplanned, yet somehow as inevitable as dawn after darkness.

“Eight years,” he said, his voice barely audible above the helicopter’s roar. “I’ve lived for one purpose, one moment.”

“And after?” she asked, the question that had haunted them both since that first kiss.

His thumb traced a line across her wrist, the simple touch sending heat spiraling through her despite everything they’d just survived—or perhaps because of it. Life affirming itself in the wake of death.

“That,” he said, his dark eyes never leaving hers, “is what I intend to find out. With you.”

The reckoning was at hand. But for the first time in eight years, Atticus Cameron was looking beyond vengeance to something he'd thought forever lost.

A future.

## Chapter Fifteen

Washington, DC sparkled beneath them as the Dynamis jet began its descent, the city's monuments illuminated against the gathering twilight like beacons in the darkness. Sabrina watched Atticus staring out the window, his profile etched in harsh relief against the last burnished rays of sunset. They were finally closing in on Mitchell.

The time since the failed demonstration had been devoted to preparation—building an airtight case, coordinating with trusted contacts in federal agencies, and arming themselves with evidence that would bring down one of the most powerful men in the country.

“He'll be at the Kennedy Center in exactly ninety minutes,” Cal reported, not looking up from his array of screens. Despite the exhaustion shadowing his eyes, he radiated the focused intensity of someone on the verge of completing a mission eight years in the making. “Diplomatic reception honoring the British Ambassador. Over three hundred guests, including cabinet members, foreign dignitaries, and half the Senate Intelligence Committee.”

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“Security?” Atticus asked, his voice carrying that particular stillness that preceded decisive action.

“Six personal bodyguards plus venue security and Secret Service for the senior officials.” Cal pulled up the building schematics on the main screen. “Mitchell’s been maintaining his usual packed schedule—committee hearings this morning, lunch with lobbyists, a ribbon-cutting at a veterans’ center this afternoon, and now this diplomatic reception. Acting like his operation hasn’t just been dismantled. I’ve identified three potential access points that bypass the main security checkpoints. And I have something better than standard infiltration.”

He slid a small velvet box across the table. Atticus opened it to reveal two elegant invitation cards embossed with gold lettering.

“Ambassador Daniels send his regrets,” Cal explained with a hint of satisfaction. “Sudden diplomatic emergency requiring his presence elsewhere. Very unfortunate. But his credentials have already been processed for security clearance, along with his attaché from the State Department, so their places at the reception—with full access to all areas of the venue—remain available. We’ve substituted your credentials as Deputy Assistant Secretary Rogers from the State Department’s European Affairs Bureau and his aide, Ms. Parker.”

“Ready to attend a diplomatic reception, Doc?” Atticus asked.

“I don’t recall packing formalwear for a bioweapon interception,” she replied dryly.

“Handled,” Eden said, gesturing to the garment bags hanging in the jet’s small

closet. “Designer gown, your size. Shoes, jewelry, everything you need. We’ve thought of everything.”

“Of course you have,” Sabrina murmured, still adjusting to the seamless efficiency with which Dynamis operated. She caught Atticus watching her, something like appreciation warming his dark gaze as it traveled over her, already imagining her in formal attire.

“The plan isn’t just to confront him,” Atticus said, turning back to the tactical display. “It’s to trap him in his own words, in a room full of witnesses he can’t control or eliminate.”

He outlined the strategy quickly. The evidence of Mitchell’s bioweapon operation had been packaged into a digital file, ready for simultaneous distribution to every major news outlet, federal agency, and international security organization. The trigger for that distribution—a single command from Cal—would be activated only after they’d confronted Mitchell personally.

“We’re not just ending his career or sending him to prison,” Atticus said. “We’re destroying everything he’s built. His legacy. His reputation. His freedom. I want him to live long enough to watch it all crumble around him.”

“The team will be positioned here, here, and here,” Max added, indicating points on the hotel schematic. “Jade will maintain overwatch from the adjacent building. Nate and I will coordinate with our FBI contact—Deputy Director Kessler still owes us for Bucharest—to ensure federal agents are ready to move the moment we give the signal.”

“And Mitchell’s security?” Sabrina asked, studying the tactical plan.

“Will be occupied,” Eden replied with a cold smile that transformed her delicate



features into something predatory. “Reza’s team has created a diversion that will draw at least half of them away from the ballroom at the critical moment.”

The plan was comprehensive, meticulous, and had the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances—exactly what Sabrina would expect from an organization that had spent eight years preparing for this moment.

“Wheels down in seven minutes,” the pilot announced through the intercom. “Weather is clear, temperature 83 degrees with high humidity. Typical August in DC.”

Atticus turned to Sabrina, and for a brief moment, the commander receded, revealing the man beneath—the one who had held her through the night after the airfield, whose mouth had claimed hers with hunger that matched her own, whose eyes now held a promise deeper than their current mission.

“This ends tonight,” he said simply. “One way or another.”

“I know,” she replied, reaching for his hand. Their fingers intertwined, the contact brief but grounding. “And then we begin.”

Something flickered in his eyes—hope, perhaps, or the first tentative reach toward a future he hadn’t allowed himself to imagine for eight long years. He lifted their joined hands, brushing his lips across her knuckles in a gesture that sent heat cascading through her system despite the solemnity of the moment.

“Then we begin,” he agreed.

\* \* \*

The Kennedy Center’s grand foyer epitomized Washington diplomacy and power—soaring ceilings, dramatic red carpeting, and the distinctive scent of

international politics that manifested as discreet perfume, aged bourbon, and fresh flowers arranged in displays that probably cost more than most people's monthly rent. The air-conditioning worked overtime against the oppressive August heat, creating an oasis of cool elegance that contrasted sharply with the muggy evening outside. Uniformed staff moved through the crowd with silent efficiency, offering champagne and hors d'oeuvres to guests who controlled billions in defense contracts and influenced global policy with casual remarks over drinks.

Sabrina felt eyes tracking her as they entered the reception hall, though whether due to the emerald silk gown that highlighted her amber eyes or the commanding presence of the man beside her, she couldn't be certain. Atticus wore his tuxedo with the easy confidence of someone accustomed to moving in elite circles, though she noted the way his hand occasionally brushed the concealed weapon beneath his jacket—the soldier never fully at ease in civilian settings.

“Ah, Deputy Assistant Secretary Rogers! And Ms. Parker!” A silver-haired British diplomat approached, extending his hand with delicate formality. “I don't believe we've been formally introduced. Lord Whitmore, Deputy Foreign Secretary. We were told Ambassador Davis couldn't attend.”

Sabrina knew Lord Whitmore was part of Atticus's plan, and that the two had some history together. But the ease in which the two men fell into their roles was amazing. Hollywood should take note.

“Last-minute change of plans,” Atticus replied smoothly, slipping into his role without missing a beat. “We at the State Department are always happy to represent the Ambassador.”

“Indeed,” the diplomat replied, though something in his expression suggested he wasn't entirely convinced. “Mitchell seems to be enjoying himself as well. He's just over there, dominating the conversation as usual.”

Sabrina followed his gesture and saw Mitchell. He exuded the polished charisma of a career politician, his silver hair perfectly coiffed, his smile seemingly genuine as he clapped a foreign dignitary on the shoulder. Looking at him, one would never guess that he'd just watched his bioweapon operation dismantled in Texas. No hint that he'd orchestrated the development of a weapon capable of killing millions or that he maintained a veneer of respectability while dealing in death and corruption.

“The Ambassador’s viewing area is just there,” the diplomat continued, gesturing toward the right side of the reception hall. “Do try the canapés—they’re divine.”

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They made their way through the crowd, Atticus's hand at the small of Sabrina's back, the gentle pressure both possessive and protective. Through her nearly invisible earpiece, she could hear Cal's voice providing continuous updates.

"Mitchell's security detail is in standard formation," he reported. "Two at the main entrance, one at each side exit, two within ten feet of Mitchell himself. Reza's team is in position for the diversion in approximately twelve minutes."

Atticus acknowledged with the barest nod, maintaining his cover as he guided Sabrina to their designated viewing area. They'd chosen their timing carefully—late enough in the evening that security would have settled into routine, early enough that Mitchell wouldn't yet be surrounded by his most influential contacts.

"Mitchell hasn't spotted us yet," Sabrina murmured, noting how the senator was surrounded by a cluster of foreign dignitaries across the crowded reception hall.

"Good," Atticus replied, his voice steady despite the tension evident in the rigid set of his shoulders. "We'll approach on our terms, when the moment is right. In a room this crowded, with so many diplomatic distractions, we have the element of surprise."

"His arrogance will be our advantage," she said, accepting a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. She wouldn't drink it—needed to maintain absolute clarity for what was coming—but the prop completed their appearance as typical diplomatic staff.

For the next ten minutes, they maintained their cover, engaging in polite conversation with the other attendees in their vicinity—a cultural attaché from France, a senior aide to the British Prime Minister, and a Swiss diplomat whose country maintained

neutrality in most conflicts. Sabrina marveled at Atticus's ability to navigate these waters, matching the casual international references and policy discussions despite his focused attention remaining always on Mitchell.

"Diversion initiating in three minutes," Cal advised through comms. "Nate and Max are in position with FBI assets. Eden has secured the secondary exit route. Jade has overwatch established."

Atticus's hand found Sabrina's beneath the table, a brief, tight squeeze that communicated more than words could express.

"Two minutes," Cal continued. "Atticus, the evidence package is ready for distribution on your command."

Sabrina watched Mitchell work the room, stopping at each cluster of diplomats for brief conversations, his political instincts evident in the way he remembered names, referenced personal details, and made each person feel momentarily significant. A master manipulator who had built his career on the appearance of integrity while dealing in death and corruption behind closed doors.

"One minute."

Atticus rose smoothly from his chair, buttoning his tuxedo jacket with casual elegance. "Shall we, darling?" he asked, extending his hand to Sabrina.

She accepted it, allowing him to guide her toward Mitchell's location. They timed their approach to intersect with the Senator as he moved between groups, maximizing the number of potential witnesses while minimizing his security's ability to intervene discreetly.

"Thirty seconds."

Mitchell was laughing at something the French Ambassador had said, his head thrown back in apparent delight, when the first notes of the diversion reached them—a commotion at the main entrance, raised voices, and the distinctive sound of security personnel moving rapidly in response.

“Sir, we have a situation,” one of Mitchell’s bodyguards murmured, leaning in close. “We should move you to a secure location.”

“Nonsense,” Mitchell replied, waving him off with the confidence of a man who’d never faced real consequences. “It’s nothing. Probably just an overzealous protestor. Handle it quietly.”

The bodyguard hesitated, torn between his employer’s command and his professional instincts, then reluctantly moved toward the disturbance, leaving Mitchell momentarily less protected than usual.

“Now,” Cal confirmed.

Atticus moved forward, Sabrina at his side, closing the remaining distance to Mitchell with measured strides. The Senator turned at their approach, political smile already forming, ready to greet potential donors—until recognition dawned in his eyes, the affability giving way to momentary shock before his mask reasserted itself.

“Mr. Cameron,” he said, recovery impressively swift. “What an unexpected pleasure. I don’t believe you were on the guest list.”

“Hello, Warren,” Atticus replied, his voice carrying the lethal calm of a predator who had finally cornered its prey. “Interesting timing for a diplomatic appearance, wouldn’t you say?”

Mitchell’s gaze shifted to Sabrina, recognition flickering in his eyes. “Dr. Wells. I’m

surprised to see you in this context. Quite a leap from trauma surgery to whatever this is.” His dismissive gesture encompassed both of them, though the tightness around his eyes betrayed his growing concern.

“Less of a leap than you might think,” she replied, chin lifting slightly. “Neutralizing threats is part of my expertise, whether they’re bioweapons or the men who create them. Your demonstration in Texas didn’t quite go as planned, did it?”

Mitchell’s expression hardened, though his voice remained pleasant for the benefit of anyone who might be listening. “I’m quite busy at the moment, as you can see. Perhaps we could arrange a meeting through proper channels.”

“Like the proper channels you used when you ordered the hit on my wife?” Atticus asked, his voice pitched low enough that only those standing closest could hear, but carrying enough intensity that several nearby conversations faltered as attention shifted toward them. “Or perhaps the proper channels you used to fund a bioweapon program through shell companies linked to your wife’s charitable foundation?”

The blood drained from Mitchell’s face, though his political training held—he maintained his smile even as his eyes went cold and calculating. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, reaching for his phone. “But I think it’s time for you to leave before you embarrass yourself further.”

“Is that what you told Dr. Elaine Cho before you had acid poured down her throat in a public café?” Sabrina asked, stepping forward to stand shoulder to shoulder with Atticus. “Or what you told the four research scientists who disappeared from BioGenix after they developed your weapon?”

Mitchell’s gaze hardened as he assessed his situation. A ripple moved through the nearest guests, whispers spreading outward like concentric circles in still water. Mitchell’s mask slipped further, calculation giving way to something darker as

he realized the danger of this public confrontation.



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“You’re making accusations you can’t possibly prove,” he said, voice hardening as he abandoned the pretense of civility. “Security!”

“They’re occupied,” Atticus replied with cold satisfaction. “Just like the security at your demonstration site was occupied while we secured the bioweapon samples you planned to sell to international terrorists. Just like the FBI is currently occupied raiding BioGenix’s facilities and securing evidence that links directly back to you.”

More guests had turned to watch now, the whispers growing louder as phones appeared, capturing the confrontation. Mitchell’s remaining bodyguard moved toward them, hand sliding beneath his jacket.

“Hostile approaching, your six o’clock,” Jade reported calmly through their comms.

“I wouldn’t,” Atticus advised the bodyguard, turning slightly to face him while keeping Mitchell in his peripheral vision. He discreetly revealed the edge of his own weapon. “Not here, surrounded by diplomats and cameras. Think about what happens next—to your career, to your boss.”

The bodyguard hesitated, clearly weighing his options. His gaze darted from Atticus to the crowd of witnesses with phones recording, then to Mitchell who gave him a subtle head shake. The guard stepped back but remained vigilant, hand still positioned for quick access to his weapon.

“Smart decision,” Atticus said, turning back to Mitchell. “Now, as I was saying...”

He stepped closer to Mitchell, close enough that anyone watching would see only an

intense conversation rather than hear the damning words. “Your operation is exposed. Your buyers from Texas have been detained. Your weapon has been neutralized. And right now, a complete dossier of your crimes—including your direct order to eliminate my wife eight years ago because I was getting too close to your weapons dealing—is being delivered to every major news outlet, federal law enforcement agency, and international security organization.”

“You’re bluffing,” Mitchell hissed, though uncertainty had crept into his expression. “You have nothing.”

In response, Atticus removed his phone from his pocket, turning the screen to reveal a video feed—Mitchell in his private office, issuing explicit instructions regarding the bioweapon demonstration.

“Turns out your secure communication system wasn’t as secure as you thought,” Atticus said, satisfaction evident in his tone. “My tech specialist has been inside your network for months. Every conversation, every order, every detail of your operation—we have it all.”

Real fear flickered across Mitchell’s face for the first time. Then his expression hardened, and his hand moved subtly to his watch.

“If that’s true,” Mitchell said, voice dropping to a deadly whisper, “then none of us will be leaving this building alive.”

Atticus recognized the movement instantly—the slight twist of Mitchell’s watch face, the subtle click of a mechanism engaging. His combat instincts surged to the forefront.

“He’s activated something,” Atticus warned through the comms. “Cal, check the building security systems. Now.”

Sabrina stepped forward, blocking Mitchell's retreat as the senator attempted to back away. "What did you just do?"

Mitchell's lips curled into a smile that held no warmth. "Insurance policy. You should have left me alone, Cameron. You had eight years to make peace with your loss. Now everyone in this building will share your wife's fate."

"Atticus." Cal's voice came through their comms, tension evident in his normally steady tone. "I've detected an unauthorized device activation in the building's electrical system. Looks like some kind of explosive attached to the main structural supports. Timer indicates less than ten minutes."

"How many?" Atticus demanded, not taking his eyes off Mitchell.

"Multiple devices. At least six, strategically placed. If they all go, the entire building comes down."

"You're insane," Sabrina said, her medical training immediately calculating the casualties such an act would cause. "There are over a thousand people in this building."

"Collateral damage," Mitchell replied with the casual disregard of someone who had built a career on others' suffering. "Just like your wife, just like those test subjects in Texas. The world runs on necessary sacrifices."

Atticus lunged forward, grabbing Mitchell by the throat and slamming him against the nearest wall. Guests scattered, cries of alarm spreading through the reception hall as the confrontation turned violent.

"Disarm it," Atticus growled, his control finally fracturing under the weight of eight years of grief and rage. "Now."

Mitchell's security detail moved to intervene, but Nate and Eden appeared as if from nowhere, weapons drawn, creating a defensive perimeter around Atticus and Sabrina.

"I wouldn't," Nate advised the approaching guards. "Your boss just activated explosives in a building full of diplomats. You really want to be on his side when this story breaks?"

The security team hesitated, suddenly unsure of their allegiance as whispers of "explosives" rippled through the crowd, triggering a wave of panic and movement toward the exits.

"We need to evacuate," Sabrina said. "These people need to get out of here."

"If we trigger a mass evacuation, we risk losing Mitchell in the chaos," Eden countered. "And he's the only one who might know how to disarm the devices."

"I've alerted Deputy Director Kessler," Cal reported through comms. "FBI tactical teams are mobilizing, but they're still minutes out. You don't have that kind of time."

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Atticus maintained his grip on Mitchell, whose face was beginning to redden from the pressure. “Where are the devices? How do we disarm them?”

Mitchell laughed, a harsh, rattling sound under Atticus’s grip. “You can’t. Once activated, only my death stops the countdown. Dead man’s switch, Cameron. Even if you kill me, the charges still detonate. You’ve lost.”

Sabrina caught Atticus’s eye, a plan already forming. “Let the team locate the devices. I’ll stay with you.”

“The detonator signal—it must run on a specific frequency,” Atticus said, his tactical mind working through the problem even as he maintained his hold on Mitchell. “Cal, can you isolate and jam it?”

“Already trying,” Cal confirmed, the sound of furious typing audible through the comms. “But I need to know the frequency range. These older buildings have so much interference?—”

“Check his watch,” Sabrina said suddenly, her gaze fixed on Mitchell’s wrist. “The detonator’s built into it. That’s what he activated.”

Atticus wrenched Mitchell’s arm upward, confirming Sabrina’s observation. The senator’s custom timepiece was no ordinary watch—the back panel had slid aside to reveal a sophisticated electronic component.

“Cal, I’m sending you visuals,” Atticus said, angling his tactical glasses to capture the watch’s details.

“Got it,” Cal replied. “That’s military-grade tech, similar to what we saw in Kazakhstan. Give me two minutes.”

“We don’t have two minutes,” Eden interrupted. “This place is about to become a stampede.”

The panic was spreading faster now, diplomats and dignitaries pushing toward the exits as security tried to maintain order. Through the growing chaos, Atticus spotted movement at the main entrance—Deputy Director Kessler had arrived with a team of FBI agents, attempting to secure the area.

“Max, coordinate with Kessler. Get these people out in an orderly evacuation,” Atticus ordered through comms. “Jade, Eden, Nate—find those devices. Cal will direct you from the building schematics.”

“What about him?” Sabrina asked, nodding toward Mitchell, who had begun to struggle against Atticus’s grip.

“He’s coming with us,” Atticus replied, his voice carrying the cold determination of someone who had waited eight years for this moment. “If those charges detonate, he goes with them.”

He dragged Mitchell toward a service corridor, away from the panicking crowd, with Sabrina following close behind. The senator fought against Atticus’s iron grip, but years of grief-fueled training had made Atticus impossibly strong.

“You’re making a mistake,” Mitchell gasped, his polished veneer crumbling completely. “I have contacts in every agency, in every branch of government. You think this ends with me? There are a dozen people ready to continue my work.”

“Then we’ll hunt them down too,” Atticus replied, shoving Mitchell into a

maintenance room and securing the door behind them. “But first, we deal with you.”

“Devices located,” Jade’s voice came through the comms. “First one’s on the main support column near the east entrance. It’s...sophisticated. Military grade.”

“Same here,” Nate reported. “West stairwell. Timer shows seven minutes, twelve seconds.”

“I’ve analyzed the detonator frequency,” Cal reported. “Working on the jamming signal now, but there’s something else—the devices appear to have redundant triggers. Even if we jam the primary signal, they’re designed to detonate if they lose contact with the controller for more than sixty seconds.”

“Dead man’s switch, like he said,” Atticus confirmed, turning to Mitchell. “So if you die or the signal is jammed too long, everything blows.”

Mitchell’s smug expression returned. “I told you. No way out.”

Sabrina had been examining the watch with a clinical eye. “Wait. These components—I recognize the design from a military project I consulted on. It’s not just a transmitter; it’s also the master control unit. The deactivation code should be accessible through the watch itself.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Atticus said, the cold fury in his voice making even Mitchell flinch.

In one swift, brutal motion, Atticus seized Mitchell’s arm and twisted it at an unnatural angle. The sharp crack of breaking bone was followed by Mitchell’s agonized scream as his wrist shattered under Atticus’s grip. Without hesitation, Atticus removed the watch from the senator’s now-limp wrist.

“Eight years,” Atticus said quietly as Mitchell gasped in pain. “That’s nothing compared to what my wife suffered.”

Mitchell slumped against the wall, face pale with shock and pain, his broken wrist cradled against his chest. His eyes burned with hatred, but the senator remained silent, his arrogance finally giving way to the reality of his situation.

Atticus turned his attention to the watch, examining it with focused intensity. “Cal, can you access the interface?” he asked, holding the device up to his communication device.

“I can try, but that level of encryption would take hours to break conventionally,” Cal replied. “We need the direct access code.”

“Which Mitchell won’t give us,” Sabrina said, her gaze locked with the senator’s. “But there might be another way.” She leaned closer to Atticus, lowering her voice. “These systems often have biometric backups—fingerprint or retinal scan—in case the primary code is forgotten.”



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Understanding dawned in Atticus's eyes. "Hold him," he instructed Sabrina, handing her his sidearm.

She took the weapon with an ease that spoke of her military training, keeping it trained on Mitchell as Atticus examined the watch more closely.

"Ah," Atticus said after a moment, finding a nearly invisible sensor on the watch's side. "Fingerprint scanner, just as you thought."

Mitchell lunged for the door suddenly, but Sabrina blocked his path, the weapon unwavering in her grip. "I wouldn't," she advised calmly. "I served two tours as a combat surgeon. I know exactly where to shoot to cause maximum pain with minimum risk of death."

"Four minutes," came Eden's voice through the comms.

Atticus moved with cold purpose, grabbing Mitchell's hand and forcing his thumb against the scanner despite the senator's resistance. The watch emitted a soft beep, and a small display flashed green.

"Cal, we're in. Transmitting the interface access now."

"Getting it," Cal confirmed. "It's a standard military detonation protocol—multiple redundancies, but centrally controlled. I can initiate the disarm sequence, but I need the authorization code. It should be visible somewhere in the watch interface."

Atticus examined the small display, where a series of numbers had appeared. "I've got

it. Transmitting now.”

“Received. Initiating disarm protocol.” The tension in Cal’s voice was palpable even through the comms. “Sending deactivation signals to all devices...now.”

Seconds ticked by, each one stretching to infinity as they waited for confirmation.

“Device one disarmed,” Jade reported first.

“Device two disarmed,” followed Nate almost immediately.

“Three and four confirmed disarmed,” Eden added.

“Five and six...disarmed,” Max concluded. “We’re clear. All devices neutralized.”

Relief washed through Sabrina, though her weapon remained steady. Atticus’s posture shifted subtly—the immediate threat eliminated, but his focus on Mitchell undiminished.

“It’s over, Warren,” he said. “Your operation, your freedom, your legacy—it’s all gone.”

Mitchell’s face contorted with hatred, his carefully maintained political mask shattered completely. “You have no idea what you’ve done,” he hissed. “The bioweapon program was just one piece of a much larger operation. There are threats coming that you can’t even imagine, threats my research could have protected us against.”

“Save it for your trial,” Atticus replied. “Though I doubt national security will be your primary concern in a supermax prison.”

The door opened behind them, admitting Deputy Director Kessler and two tactical agents, weapons drawn.

“Senator Warren Mitchell,” Kessler announced formally, though her eyes betrayed recognition when they met Mitchell’s. “You’re under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, illegal weapons development, terrorism, and treason against the United States. Not to mention attempting to bomb a building full of international diplomats.”

Mitchell’s eyes swept the room, calculating even in defeat. “Rebecca,” he said, his voice shifting to a confidential tone that had likely served him well in political negotiations. “You know me. We’ve worked together for years. This is a misunderstanding?—”

“Save it, Senator,” Kessler cut him off. “I’ve reviewed the evidence myself. It’s comprehensive. You’re finished.”

As the FBI agents moved to take Mitchell into custody, the senator made one final, desperate lunge—not toward the door, but toward Atticus, hands outstretched like claws seeking to inflict one last injury.

Atticus sidestepped with the fluid grace of a man who had spent decades in combat, using Mitchell’s momentum against him. The senator crashed into the wall with bone-jarring force, then slumped to the floor, dazed but conscious.

“Eight years,” Atticus said, standing over him. “Eight years I’ve dreamed of killing you for what you did to Jane. But this—” he gestured to the FBI agents securing Mitchell with handcuffs, “—this is better. You’ll live to watch everything you built crumble. Every day in your cell, you’ll remember this moment and know that I won.”

Mitchell glared up at him, blood trickling from his split lip. “This isn’t over, Cameron.”

“Yes, Warren,” Atticus replied with calm certainty. “It is.”

The FBI agents hauled Mitchell to his feet, reciting his rights as they led him from the room. Deputy Director Kessler lingered, her gaze meeting Atticus’s.

“You know this will get complicated,” she said. “A senator with his connections?—”

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“The evidence is ironclad,” Atticus interrupted. “And now that it’s in federal hands, too many people know. He can’t make this disappear.”

Kessler nodded. “Consider us even for Bucharest,” she said. “Though I suspect we’ll be cleaning up this mess for years.”

After she departed, Atticus and Sabrina were left alone in the small maintenance room, the adrenaline of the past minutes slowly ebbing away.

“Atticus,” Cal’s voice came through the comms. “News networks are already breaking the story. Mitchell’s arrest is trending worldwide. It’s done.”

Sabrina watched the tension finally drain from Atticus’s body—not completely, perhaps never completely—but enough that she could see the first hints of a man who might someday exist without vengeance as his primary purpose.

“It’s done,” he repeated.

She stepped closer, her hand finding his, fingers intertwining in a gesture that had become familiar in the brief but intense time they’d known each other.

“What now?” she asked softly.

Atticus turned to her, and the transformation stole her breath—the commander who had orchestrated Mitchell’s downfall had receded, revealing the man beneath, one who was tentatively reaching for something beyond vengeance and duty.

“Now,” he said, his voice rough with emotion he no longer needed to suppress, “we begin.”

His mouth found hers beneath the harsh fluorescent lights, transforming the sterile maintenance room into something intimate and sacred. Their kiss held the assurance of everything they’d endured—a seal on promises spoken and unspoken, a bridge between vengeance satisfied and possibility awakened.

The hunt was over. Their story—the one written in something stronger than blood—was just beginning.

## Epilogue

Golden autumn sunlight bathed the lakeside cabin in amber warmth as Sabrina stood on the weathered dock, coffee mug cradled between her hands. The early morning chill nipped at her exposed skin, her breath forming delicate white clouds with each exhale. She’d wrapped herself in one of Atticus’s thick sweaters, its sleeves falling past her wrists as she gazed out across the water where mist still hovered over the surface, creating a dreamlike quality that matched her contentment.

A few maple leaves, brilliant crimson and gold, spiraled down from overhanging trees to land on the water’s surface, creating ripples that expanded outward into the stillness. Behind her, through the cabin’s open door, she could hear Atticus moving around the kitchen, the familiar sounds of their weekend routine settling into place.

The simple platinum band on her finger caught the light as she raised the mug to her lips, the coffee’s warmth a welcome contrast to the crisp morning air. Three weeks married, and sometimes she still found herself staring at it in wonder. The small, private ceremony had been exactly what they both needed—understated, efficient, and focused on what mattered.

“They’re calling for another indictment,” Atticus said, stepping out onto the dock. His

boots made hollow sounds against the wooden planks as he approached, carrying a fresh cup of coffee. He handed it to her, taking her cooling one in exchange. "Mitchell's chief financial officer is cooperating with prosecutors. The conspiracy just keeps expanding."

"Good," Sabrina replied, leaning into him as his arm circled her waist. The warmth of his body cut through the autumn chill, as comforting as the solid strength that had become her anchor. "Justice should be thorough."

He pressed a kiss to her temple, his lips lingering against her skin. "Speaking of thorough, the Chief Medical Officer's new bioweapon protocols were approved by the board yesterday. Unanimous vote."

Pride warmed her at the news. In the three months since accepting the position at Dynamis, she'd revolutionized their medical response procedures, drawing on both her surgical expertise and her field experience. The work was challenging, meaningful, and allowed her to save lives on a scale she'd never imagined possible at Dallas Memorial.

The weekend retreat to Atticus's Lake Cypress cabin had become a monthly tradition—three days away from Dynamis operations, from Washington politics, from the demands of their respective responsibilities. Three days of normalcy, hard-won and fiercely protected.

Sabrina twisted in his arms to face him, studying the changes three months had wrought. The shadows hadn't disappeared from his eyes—perhaps they never would—but they no longer defined him. He smiled easier now, laughed more often. The mission that had driven him for eight years was complete, yet he had found purpose beyond vengeance.

"I never thought I'd have this again," he said quietly, his fingers tracing the curve of her cheek as if memorizing her features. "After everything... I never thought I'd find

someone who understood both sides of me—the commander and the man.”

“And yet, here we are,” she replied, covering his hand with hers, feeling the cold metal of his matching band against her skin. They’d had this conversation before, in different ways, at different times. The ghosts of their pasts hadn’t disappeared, but they’d learned to make room for them, to honor what came before without letting it overshadow what lay ahead.

Atticus’s phone buzzed, and he checked it with the reflexive attention of someone who had spent a lifetime responding to crises. His expression remained calm as he read the message, betraying none of the tension such interruptions once triggered.

“Max and Jade took down that arms dealer in Prague,” he reported, slipping the phone back into his pocket. “Operation complete, all objectives secured.”

“Any casualties?” she asked, the doctor in her always alert to potential injuries.

“None on our side.” His arms tightened around her briefly before releasing her. “The team handled it perfectly.”

The fact that he could step back, delegate critical missions to his team without personally overseeing every detail—this was perhaps the most significant change of all. He’d built Dynamis as an extension of himself, a tool for hunting. Now he was transforming it into something greater: a legacy that would continue beyond any single mission.

“So we have the weekend to ourselves,” Sabrina observed, smiling as another plume of white breath escaped her lips. She slid her hands beneath his jacket, feeling the warm skin beneath.

His answering smile held promise and heat, but also something deeper—a contentment that had once seemed impossible. “I have some ideas,” he murmured,



gathering her closer as a gust of wind sent leaves dancing across the dock around them.

She yielded to his embrace, her body fitting against his as naturally as breathing. The simple truth of loving and being loved in return still amazed her—this feeling neither of them had expected to find again but had somehow discovered in each other.

The water lapped gently against the shore as they held each other, two hearts finally at peace. After everything, they had found a love that no darkness could touch.