



Bullets and Dandelions

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Description: My name is Tess Reynolds, and I'll admit few people would think I'm a badass Army sniper called the Scorpion. Afterall, women snipers were unheard of in 1990. People look at me and see a petite blonde who is cute as a button. My father calls it my natural camouflage.

My time in the Middle East has been full of unforeseen complications. I have a rogue CIA agent trying to kill me and I caught the attention of a Force Recon Marine by the name of Alexander Stone. Wowzer! He's hot but he's also the biggest jackass I have ever met. To make things even more interesting, I need the Jackass's help to stay alive.

This novella is the prequel to the Gemma Stone series. How it all began.

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Prologue

How did I become the infamous sniper Scorpion? It's easy when your father is a CIA operative assigned to the Middle East. After my mother was killed in a roadside bombing, he began teaching me the business. By the time I was seventeen, I was an expert shot, I could fly a helicopter, and I knew eight ways to kill a man.

I don't remember much about my mother except she smelled like roses, and she always called me Tess Ann. Pops refuses to talk about her. It was like something inside him broke when she died. All he lives for now is vengeance and I was to play an important part in that.

I later discovered my mother had been a surgical nurse for Doctors Without Borders. According to the nurse I tracked down, my mother met Pops when he showed up to be treated for a gunshot wound. The nurse claimed it was love at first sight. I have a hard time imagining my father in love, since he has never shown me any affection. Sometimes, I think he hates me because I look so much like her.

On my twenty-first birthday, Pops expected me to join the CIA. I had no desire to be a black ops assassin like him. I wanted to help people, not kill them. A fact that drove Pops nuts. I could take out a terrorist threatening innocent civilians, but shooting a politician whose views differed from mine, was never going to happen. One look at Pop's implacable expression and I started planning my great escape.

By the time I turned nineteen, I had everything in place. Money, fake passports and travel arrangements. The minute Pops left on one of his black ops' missions, I flew to Mumbai, India, changed my appearance and took a small puddle jumper to Seoul,

South Korea. After a short layover, I boarded a plane to Tokyo, Japan. Once I landed, I rented a cheap hotel and disguised myself as an elderly Chinese woman. I was amazed at how lifelike the silicone face mask was, but it itched like crazy. I joined a bunch of senior citizens on a once in a lifetime luxury cruise to Hawaii. I quickly learned old folks were a rowdy bunch and horny as hell. Viagra kept the party going to the wee hours of the morning. Every night!

From Hawaii I flew to Los Angeles and joined the Army. I had no desire for a nine-to-five job and with my unique skills, a military career was the logical choice. After the rigorous training Pops put me through, boot camp was anything but challenging.

The Drill Sergeant didn't know what to make of me and I terrified Sally, my battle buddy. Part of the Army's indoctrination was getting the new recruits to work together. Wherever I went, Sally had to follow and vice versa. Pops had kept me isolated and never allowed me to have any friends, so this was a learning experience. By the time boot camp ended Sally and I were best buddies. She took me shopping and taught me how to use makeup. I made sure she passed all her combat training.

The day I graduated from boot camp, Pops showed up at Fort Leonard Wood's training center. He was beyond furious and tried to get the Army to discharge me. They wouldn't. He went up the food chain, and talked to General Grandville, who was intrigued by my abilities. Especially, my shooting skills. I never, ever miss. The General knew exactly who my father was and did the unexpected. He sent me to sniper school at Fort Benning. I thought Pops was going to have a coronary.

In 1990 women snipers were unheard of and things got a little intense. Thank God, Pops had taught me hand-to-hand combat and I knew how to fight dirty. After the first two dustups, the guys left me alone.

A lot of the soldiers failed the stalking and camouflage part of the training. For me, it was easy. I was fourteen when Pops handed me a burka and told me to follow Abdul

Zahed, a well-known terrorist, around Kabul. At the end of the day, he expected a detailed report of what he did and who he had met with. Pops made it very clear, if I got caught, I was on my own. Talk about a punch in the gut. I was nothing more than a useful tool for Pops to use in his quest for vengeance.

I passed the seven-week sniper course with flying colors, but my joy at finally being free of my father was extremely short-lived. To my dismay, Pops and some CIA bigwigs made a deal with General Grandville. I was going to the Middle East alright, but as a glorified secretary, not as a sniper. Captain Harris needed an aide, and the Army also got a highly trained sniper with the perfect cover story.

My time in the Middle East was full of unforeseen complications. The biggest surprise was a Marine by the name of Alexander Stone. Wowzer! Was he hot but he was also the biggest jackass I had ever met.

Chapter One

Dust shrouded the sky turning the sun into an angry red ball. Eroded pinnacles of granite protruded from the ground like hungry teeth. A few stubborn bushes sprouted from the cracked stone. From my perch on a narrow ledge, I studied the Taliban's fortified compound through the scope of my modified Barrett M82 sniper rifle, which I called Bertha. Shit! There were at least forty militants milling about and once again Captain Harris had sent me out without a spotter or any kind of backup.

I was pretty sure Pops had something to do with it. He hated being disobeyed and this was my punishment. The fact I might die didn't seem to bother him at all. Yep, I was feeling the love.

My father also stuck me with the swell callsign of Scorpion. Ugh. After surviving seven missions behind enemy lines, the Scorpion's exploits suddenly became common knowledge. Captain Harris was beyond furious. Me? I knew Pops was

behind the leaks. He was trying to get me kicked out of the Army, but it wasn't working. Yet.

Unfortunately, my father is a relentless bastard and that's when the rumors started. Like, the Scorpion was a CIA assassin who had slain over a hundred people. Nope, that was Pops.

Or the Scorpion had killed six militants with a single bullet. I hadn't and anyone who believed that was an idiot.

My favorite? I was supposedly a six-foot-five battle-hardened Navy Seal who got tossed out for insubordination and went to work for the Army. I laughed so hard, I cried. Seriously? Where did they come up with this crap? I'll admit few people would think I was a badass sniper. I mean, I have silvery blonde hair, I'm petite and cute as a button. Pops calls it my natural camouflage.

Things got even more interesting after that. Central Command received my father's urgent warning that a warlord by the name of Imad Shakur was planning on beheading an American soldier on live television. Captain Harris saw an opportunity for advancement and contacted the CIA directly.

Harris learned Pops was undercover as an arms dealer and he had located the captured Marine in a remote fortress in the Koh-i-Baba Mountain range. Pops requested my services and the next thing I knew; I was on a helicopter headed deep into Taliban territory.

Before I was dropped off, Pops sent me a coded message. He would be wearing a blue turban and tunic with Afghanistan's football logo on his shoulder. He was the warlord's honored guest and would be front and center for the execution. My job was to keep the militants off his ass while he rescued the soldier.

Knowing my father, there was enough C4 hidden in the crates of weapons he was selling to level the compound. I stiffened when two heavily armed terrorists dragged a battered American soldier up on a wooden platform and forced him to his knees.

Where was daddy dearest? A flash of blue caught my attention. There he was, armed to the teeth and sporting his scary smile.

A fat man wearing a black turban, and robes strutted up carrying a big ass sword. He waved it around and shouted, “Allah Akbar!”

“Allah Akbar!” The Taliban idiots sprayed the air with bullets.

I grinned. What goes up, must come down. Sure enough, a couple of the militants fell to the ground and didn’t move again. I loved it when they made my job easier.

I put the crosshairs on the forehead of the fat guy and quickly adjusted my scope for the increasing wind velocity. The instant he raised the sword, I fired.

The fat guy’s head jerked back, and he crumpled to the platform.

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The crowd stared at the body in stunned disbelief.

I quickly took out the guards.

Pops yanked the Marine off the platform and all hell broke loose.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Explosions rocked the compound, and fireballs rose high into the air. Burning debris rained down on the compound, starting even more fires. The freaked-out militants were shooting at anything that moved; be it friend or foe.

I shook my head in disbelief. For blood-thirsty terrorists, they sure scared easily.

Kaboom! A fuel truck went up in flames.

Shit! The smoke was so thick I couldn't see Pops or the soldier anymore.

A motorcycle suddenly roared out of the compound. Wearing his crazed, kamikaze smile, Pops drove like a maniac. The poor soldier hung on for dear life.

The militants jumped into several battered trucks and chased after them.

I shot out the front right tire on the lead vehicle. It swerved wildly, hit a rock and rolled over. Six militants flew out of the bed of the truck.

The vehicle following it veered to the right trying to miss the bodies littering the ground and ran into a rock wall. The militants in that truck bed were thrown into a row of bee hives.

Thousands of bees erupted from the hives and attacked the militants.

Arms flailing madly, the militants ran for their lives.

I grinned. That should keep them busy. Two down, four to go. I placed the crosshairs on the driver of the third truck.

The crack of a high-powered rifle echoed off the mountains.

The driver I had in my crosshairs suddenly slumped over. The vehicle spun out-of-control and smashed into a shepherd's hut.

What the hell?

Crack! A cargo van slammed into the wall.

Damn. There was another sniper at work. Since the captured soldier was a Marine, I bet one of their Force Recon teams was here to rescue him too. Where was Pops? My eyes widened in horror. Oh, my God, he was heading straight for a cliff. He wouldn't, would he?

Shooting off the edge of cliff, Pops somehow managed to stay in control of the

motorcycle when it landed with a teeth-jarring jolt.

The poor Marine was bug-eyed and white as a ghost. I didn't blame him. Pops had to be doing at least sixty as he swerved around several boulders and blasted through a herd of sheep.

Some of the dumber militants chased after him. I watched as they sailed off the cliff and went airborne for about thirty seconds before crashing into a dry riverbed. Kablooey! The vehicles exploded; rocketing shards of metal flew in every direction.

Between the smoke and flames, I lost sight of Pops. He probably had another vehicle tucked away. I swung my scope back to the burning compound. Several militants were yelling into their radios. There wasn't a doubt in my mind they were calling in reinforcements. Time to get the hell out of Dodge.

Chapter Two

The wail of the wind was broken only by the whomp-whomp of an old Huey helicopter searching for Pops and the Marine. From the brief coded message Pops sent me, I knew they were safe. Me? Not so much.

It was another eight miles to my pickup point and getting there was going to be fun. The Taliban militants were everywhere and there was a sandstorm coming. I sure as hell didn't want to get caught out in the open when it hit.

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I wiped at the sweat slithering down my face and neck. God was it hot, but I didn't dare take off my ghillie suit. The camouflage netting with burlap strips was the only thing keeping my pursuers from spotting me. My energy levels were dropping rapidly, I had a killer headache and was feeling a bit nauseous. All signs of heat exhaustion. Not a big surprise. The Taliban had been chasing me for over four hours. To make things even more challenging, my water was almost gone.

Thankfully, there was a small, spring-fed lake about two miles due east. I could fill my canteen and take a short swim to cool down. Just the thought of the cold water on my overheated skin brought a smile to my face. I broke into a jog. Paradise awaited.

The whomp-whomp grew louder as the Huey got closer and closer. I increased my pace, which wasn't easy with a forty-pound backpack weighing me down. If I could get to that ravine ahead of me, I would be safe.

The Huey abruptly changed course.

Shit! Had they spotted me? I dove under a mushroom-shaped rock and held my breath as the helicopter hovered overhead. The gunner had a M60 machine gun pointed my way. If they had infrared technology, I would be the one getting my head lopped off. After what seemed like an eternity it flew off. I let out a shuddering breath of relief. Maybe they were worried about being caught in the sandstorm too.

I got to my feet and sprinted down the ravine. A wave of dizziness hit me, and I fell to my knees. This mission might be the one that got me killed. Would Pops miss me? Probably not. Pulling the canteen out of my backpack, I drank the last of my water and wiped the sweat out of my eyes.

Shit! Footprints. I examined the impressions carefully. Military boots. Four big men, carrying heavy backpacks and hauling ass. Dammit. I bet they were headed for the lake too. The question was: friend or foe? Did they know about the tunnel the smugglers had cut through the mountainside, or the cave filled with canvas bags of poppy seeds? God, I hoped not. I needed a safe spot to rest.

Going into stealth mode, I followed the footprints, and my shoulder sagged in relief. Instead of going up the mountainside, the tracks went east. I quickly climbed up to the tunnel.

Pulling my pistol, I crept silently down the dim passageway. The smugglers had punched a hole in the mountainside, allowing them a bird's eye view of the lake. I stopped at the mouth of the cave. The bags of poppy seeds were gone. Hopefully, that meant the smugglers wouldn't be back anytime soon.

I dropped my backpack on the ground and with a sigh of relief removed my ghillie suit. It was like wearing a suffocating tent. A wave of weariness rolled over me and all I wanted to do was sleep.

A man's laugh drew my attention.

Crap. It seemed the soldiers were enjoying the lake. A lot. Getting the binoculars out of my backpack, I walked over to the crude lookout point and surveyed the lake.

My jaw dropped. Three naked men were floating in the shallow water. They all had dog tags and looked to be American, probably the Force Recon team. My gaze locked on the biggest guy. Yowzer! He made my heart go pitty-pat. Too bad a thick, black beard covered his face. His body was utter perfection. He had to be at least six-feet-seven, with a massive chest, bulging biceps and heavily muscled thighs.

My gaze froze on his groin, and I suddenly knew what Sally meant when she said a

guy was hung like a stallion. Would that thing even fit? Since Pops never allowed me to date, I had zero experience with men. Never been kissed and the one kid that tried ended up with a busted jaw: courtesy of my father.

C'mon handsome, roll over and show me your butt.

A coyote howled.

I frowned. There weren't any coyotes in the Koh-i-Baba Mountain range or were there? I quickly surveyed the area. Nothing moved and there was no sign of any critters. I turned my attention back to the lake and my stomach knotted. It was empty. Somehow, they knew I was here. One of their scouts must have spotted my footprints.

Damn, I wasn't in any shape to go up against a Force Recon team. I could always ask them for help, but since I was the Army's secret weapon, that might get me booted. Which was exactly what Pops wanted. Come hell or high water, I wasn't going to work for the CIA. All I needed was a place to hide, but where?

I gave myself a head smack. Talk about brain dead. Pops said if the Taliban ever found me, I could escape through a narrow crevice in the cavern wall which led to a smaller cave with a waterfall. All I had to do was hide there until the Force Recon team left. Easy-peasy.

I dragged my pack over to the crevice and studied it. I was skinny, but I didn't know if I would fit. The way the rock curved, I would have about twenty inches in some places.

Crappity, crappity, crap. My backpack was too big, but I couldn't afford to leave it behind. It held my extra ammo and supplies. Removing the last package of food, I shoved it into my waistband and examined the cave. Where could I hide my backpack

and ghillie suit? My gaze settled on an outcrop of rock with a fissure big enough to conceal them. I shoved everything as far back as it would go.

Something skittered down the wall.

Shit! Was that a spider? I took a closer look. Whatever it was, it was big and hairy. Ick. I backed up and eyed the outcrop. Nope, nothing was poking out except for long furry legs.

A coyote's howl echoed down the tunnel.

Just my luck, they were damn good trackers. I removed my gun belt and tossed it in the opening. God, I hoped there weren't any more spiders.

A large shadow flickered across the wall.

So, what if the spiders were the size of a small dog. They were probably more scared of me than I was of them. I snorted. Who was I kidding? Spiders gave me the willies.

Maneuvering my body, the canteen, and the sniper rifle through the sandstone slot wasn't easy. My boot struck the weapons belt. Hooking it around my left ankle, I dragged it with me as I twisted and shimmied along the passageway.

The coyote howled again.

Damn! They were getting closer. I sidestepped as fast as I could. A finger of rock jabbed into my chest, and I couldn't move. The joy of having big breasts. I leaned my head against the rock and took a calming breath. This was the last time I would go out alone. If I had my own team, I wouldn't be in this situation.

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Pushing my breasts up with my right arm, I wiggled like crazy and managed to squeeze through. Ouch! I had scraped off a good deal of skin in the process.

I jerked on the gun belt and heaved a sigh of relief as it followed me into the smaller cave. Well, that was fun. I stood there and looked around. Sunlight poured through an opening in the roof. If things got nasty, it was an escape route. No sign of spiders or any other kind of critters.

My gaze settled on the water cascading down the rocks into a small pool. I did a fist pump. "Yes, there is a God." I propped my rifle against the wall and dropped the gun belt next to it. I couldn't resist the siren call of the water any longer. Pulling off my boots and socks I jumped in and sucked in a startled breath. Cold! It was so cold. I sloshed over to the waterfall, filled my canteen and drank my fill. Pure ambrosia.

Smiling like a loon, I stuck my head under the water and let all the sweat and sand wash away. Damn, that felt good, but my toes were going numb. I climbed out of the pool.

The wind whistled shrilly as the storm hit, but luckily, none of the sand came into the cave.

Taking out my satellite phone, I checked the weather conditions, and grimaced. The wind was clocked at over 100mph. Was my competition caught out in the sandstorm, or had they found cover?

A low beep sounded from my phone. I checked the message. The coordinates for my pickup location had been changed. My shoulders slumped. I now had an eighteen-

mile hike. Was Captain Harris responsible for the change or was it my father's idea. The bastard was determined to make me quit. I acknowledged the change.

My stomach rumbled hungrily. I hadn't eaten anything since this morning, and I couldn't afford to lose any more weight. All these missions were taking a toll on me. What I really needed was some down time. Would I get it? Not a chance.

I pulled the squashed package of tuna and crackers out of my waistband. I studied it for a moment and sighed. The chocolate bar was a melted mess. It was supposed to be my treat for the day. How had my life become so complicated?

I collapsed on the sand and carefully tore open the MRE package. Damn, the crackers were crushed. Using the plastic fork, I stirred the crackers crumbs into the tuna and wolfed it down. I eyed the squishy candy. Chocolate oozed out of the wrapper. What the hell. I crammed it in my mouth and ate the candy, paper and all.

My phone beeped again. I checked the messages. Captain Harris wanted to know if I had any contact with a Marine Force Recon team. No, I typed and hit send.

His response? Avoid them at all costs.

I didn't answer him. Why was a female sniper such a big secret? I laid my head back against the cool rock floor and closed my eyes.

"Clear," A male voice shouted.

I shot upright. Shit! The Marines were here. I glanced at my watch. Ugh. I had only been asleep for twenty minutes. Bet they were a bit sand blasted.

"What info do we have on the hostile, Johnson?" The man's low, gravelly voice sent goosebumps over my body.

“Not much, Sergeant. The boot prints belong to a size six military boot, and I tracked him to this cave,” Johnson answered.

A deep voice shot back, “Him? The scuttlebutt says the Scorpion is a woman.”

“There’s not a female alive that can pass sniper’s training, Rodriquez,” the sergeant spat in disgust.

I scowled. What a dick.

“You sure about that, sir,” Rodriquez replied. “This is an awfully small ghillie suit, the backpack has U.S. Army stamped on it, and these are tampons.”

I smothered a groan. How had they found everything so fast. And why hadn’t the damn spiders bit them?

“Sonovabitch. Find her.”

“Her boot prints lead to that slot in the wall,” Johnson said.

Someone let out a whistle. “Only a midget could squeeze through that opening.”

“I’m Sergeant Alexander Stone of the U.S. Marine Corps. Get your ass out here, soldier. We aren’t the Taliban, and I want to know what happened to the rest of your team.”

I snorted. What team?

“I outrank you, soldier,” Sergeant Stone snapped. “You will answer my questions. Does your team need to be rescued, or did you get separated from them?”

I let silence be my answer. They were too big to fit through the slot and I had my orders.

“You can’t stay in there forever.”

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The sergeant was right, I couldn't. The thought of leaving my backpack and ghillie suit behind turned my stomach. If I got into a shootout, I'd be screwed. I studied the small opening at the top of the cave. I'd fit but it would be one hell of a climb.

"Chiquita we are on the same side," Rodriquez called. "We won't hurt you."

Maybe not, but if I got kicked out of the Army, Pops and his creepy boss would be waiting for me.

Sergeant Stone snarled, "Did you freak out when the shooting started? Did you leave your team behind? Is your cowardice going to get you court-martialed?"

What a jackass. With my luck, he was the hot guy.

The sergeant let out an exasperated sigh. "Rodriquez thinks you're the Scorpion. Me? I think you're the radio operator and you left your team without any way to communicate with your base."

I gave him a one-fingered salute. Too bad the ass couldn't see it.

"There is no food in your pack, Chiquita. I bet you're hungry."

Oh great. Now they were doing good cop, bad cop.

"Join us for dinner, Chiquita. You can choose between beef stew or spaghetti."

I had to admit, I was tempted, and I was so tired of being alone.

“I’ll even toss in a chocolate bar, if you answer all my questions,” Sergeant Stone growled.

God, I wanted to shoot him.

“She might be injured,” Johnson said.

Sergeant Stone countered, “There’s no blood on her backpack or ghillie suit.”

I laid back down and tried to ignore all the noise they were making as they set up camp.

“Last chance, Chiquita.”

My stomach growled loudly. The spaghetti smelled so good.

Thwap! Thwap!

What the hell? I walked over to the slot. Someone had tossed me two candy bars. Was this some kind of trick?

“Tell me your name and I’ll give you an MRE too,” Sergeant Stone said.

I picked up my canteen and drained it dry. The water would fill my stomach for now.

“If you’re not out by morning, I’m lobbing a smoke grenade in there,” Sergeant Stone said nastily.

What a jackass. Grabbing my sniper rifle, I used the barrel to drag the candy to me. I had an eighteen-mile hike ahead of me and I would need all the calories I could get.

Chapter Three

The alarm on my watch beeped softly. I turned it off and sat up with a groan. Every muscle in my body hurt. Knowing the Marines would kill any militants or smugglers who showed up, I had slept like a baby.

The sun spilled into the cavern. I quickly ate the two chocolate bars, drank as much water as I could hold and filled my canteen.

“You’ve got a choice to make, soldier. Come out and have a nice hot breakfast or eat a lot of smoke.”

“Fuck off.”

Rodriguez laughed. “She’s got a temper.”

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Making sure my Sig Sauers were in working order, I slid them into the holsters and buckled on my gun belt.

“You’ve got twenty minutes to make up your mind,” Sergeant Stone growled.

Good thing Pops had insisted I take free climbing lessons. Slinging the sniper rifle over my shoulder, I scaled the cavern wall.

“Ten minutes, soldier,” Sergeant Stone called.

More than enough time. I braced myself against a protruding rock and pushed my sniper rifle through the gap in the roof.

“Five minutes.”

My muscles quivering from the strain, I climbed through the opening.

“Time is up.”Bang!Smoke filled the cave.

First chance I got, I was putting a scorpion in his bed. It was the perfect payback.

Smoke suddenly poured through the opening. Ugh. When Sergeant Stone realized I was long gone, he was gonna be pissed. Would he look for me on the base? You betcha he would, but he didn’t know what I looked like. As far as anyone knew, I was just a glorified secretary.

Laughing like a crazy person, I grabbed my rifle and ran down the narrow trail.

Instead of an eighteen-mile hike in the blazing sun with no food or water, I was going to the village of Tarin Kowt which was known for its groves of date palms. Once I got there, I was going to help myself to some yummy dates and a car. I was driving to the pickup point.

A coyote howled in the distance.

Sonovabitch, they were tracking me.

Thirty minutes later, I paused by the burnt out remains of a mud brick house. It was too damn quiet. There weren't any workers in the orchards. No children played in the courtyards, and I didn't see a single woman.

Propping my sniper rifle on a broken wall, I carefully surveyed the village through the scope. There was an old truck parked by a dilapidated shed and a burka fluttered on a clothesline. My best guess was the Taliban had ordered the village men to look for Pops and the Marine.

Keeping to the shadows, I snatched the burka off the clothesline and quickly put it on. It was bulky and restricted my movement, but I needed more water. I crept over to the well, drew a bucket of water and filled my canteen. My gaze fell on the battered truck. The bed had four boxes of dates.

A coyote yipped.

Shit! They were too damn close. I hurried over to the truck. No keys in the ignition, or the glove box, but not a problem. Pops had taught me how to hotwire a car. I pulled out my boot knife and went to work on the ignition.

The coyote yipped again.

I looked up. A Hispanic Marine was staring at me from the top of the hill. How did he know it was me? I gave myself a mental head smack. Duh, my sniper rifle. I twisted my knife, and the truck started. I shoved my rifle across the seat and climbed in. In the rearview mirror I watched the big guy run toward me. Wow, he was fast for someone his size. I put it in gear and took off.

Thump!

Holy hell! He was in the bed of the truck.

His low, gravelly voice commanded, “Stop!”

The hot guy was Sergeant Stone and there wasn’t a chance in hell of me stopping. I increased my speed.

Sergeant Stone reached for the door handle.

I turned the steering wheel sharply and swerved into the groves.

Palm fronds caught the sergeant across the chest and sent him flying. He landed face down in the mud.

I stuck my left hand out the window and gave him a one-fingered salute.

Sergeant Stone erupted to his feet with a roar and pulled his pistol.

Oh, hell! He was going to shoot out the tires. I put the pedal to the metal.

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His team surrounded him.

I blew out a long breath. Pissing him off was a stupid move. Sergeant Stone was an apex predator like my father. Anyone stupid enough to challenge them, seldom survived the encounter.

The narrow, twisty road forced me to slow down. I kept checking the rearview mirror. I knew the Marines would steal a car and follow me.

My phone beeped. I pulled it out and read the message. Taliban roadblock three miles ahead.

Shit! I had only cut ten miles off my hike and how in the hell did Pops know where I was? I had removed the tracker from my phone. Was he using a CIA satellite to locate me? Probably. Stopping the truck, I pulled off the burka, stuffed my pockets with dates and free climbed up the rocky mountainside. The Marines weren't far behind me, and I wasn't leaving any more tracks for them to follow.

I pulled myself over the edge of an outcrop and lay there for a moment to catch my breath. That had been a tough climb.

A car engine backfired.

Rolling over, I raised my sniper rifle and sighted in on the roadway. Here came the Marines in a piece-of-crap Toyota truck. For some reason, the Taliban loved Japanese cars. I had to admit Sergeant Stone was an excellent driver. I grinned at his furious expression. He didn't like losing. He slammed on the brakes behind my stolen truck.

Would he notice the message I left him on the windshield? I hoped so. I didn't want them walking into a Taliban ambush.

With a groan, I got to my feet and headed for the pickup location.

Chapter Four

As soon as the helicopter landed at King Faisal Air Force Base, I headed for Captain Harris's office. To my surprise, Harris wasn't waiting for me. He usually insisted on a debrief before I could eat, shower, or sleep.

I secured my weapons in his office armory and grimaced. God, did I stink. My deodorant had quit two days ago, and I desperately needed a shower. Leaving a message on the captain's desk, I headed to my quarters.

Because I was special, I had my own room. Grabbing clean underwear, a camo tee-shirt and pants out of my locker, I hit the showers. Fifteen minutes later, I braided my wet hair and made a beeline for the mess hall. I was so damn hungry.

Angry voices had me glancing at the military police's guard post. Huh? What was going on? A tank blocked my view, and I was too hungry to investigate. My eyes widened in horror. Wait a minute. One of the voices sounded awfully familiar. Was it my Marines? Nah, there's no way they could have found me this fast.

The smell from the mess hall drew me like a magnet. I was having one of everything. Grabbing a tray, I went down the line until there was no more room on my plate.

A soldier eyed my tray in disbelief. "Are you sure you've got enough food?"

"Nope, I'm coming back for seconds." I carried my tray over to an empty table and started eating.

“On your feet soldier,” Sergeant Stone growled.

Well, hell. I plastered a confused look on my face and looked up at him. “Excuse me?”

“Drop the act. You know why I’m here.”

“Sorry, but I don’t.” I went back to eating.

Sergeant Stone studied my face. “Are you the Scorpion?”

I picked up my glass of water and drained it.

“Answer the question.”

“By your stench, you’ve been out in the sun too long. Maybe you should have a medic check you over for heat stroke. It might explain your mental confusion too,” I said pleasantly.

“I could have you arrested for assault,” Sergeant Stone snapped.

I raised my eyebrows. “Got any proof of this brutal assault, sergeant? Like a picture or fingerprints or some kind of hard evidence?”

“Footprints.”

Shit! Shit! Shit! “Call me curious, but who did I assault?”

His lips twisted in self-mockery. “Me.”

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“Un huh, and where did this horrible assault occur?”

“The village of Tarin Kowt.”

“Never heard of it.” I took a big bite of chocolate cake. God, it tasted so good.

“You’re the blonde midget we’ve been tracking for the last two days, and I can prove it.”

Midget? That was kinda rude. “I’m not the person you’re looking for.”

“Yes, you are. Now get up. You are coming with me.”

“No.” I shoveled more food in my mouth.

“You see these sergeant stripes? I outrank you,” Stone bellowed.

I glanced up at him. “Do you?”

Sergeant Stone narrowed his eyes. “I don’t see any lieutenant bars on your shirt.”

“So?”

“On your feet soldier!”

“No.”

His left eye twitched. “What did you say?”

“Are you hard of hearing too? I’m not going anywhere with you.” I took another bite.

His huge hand clamped around my arm, and he jerked me around. “I could have you thrown in the brig for insubordination.”

“Okay.” That sounded pretty darn good. I could get some much-needed sleep.

“Show me the heel of your left boot.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m eating.”

“Now, soldier.”

My temper flared to life. All I wanted to do with eat my dinner in peace, but that wasn’t going to happen. “Go away before I hurt you.”

Sergeant Stone laughed. “You? Hurt me?”

“Yeah. Since I supposedly assaulted you already, why not again?” That’s when I noticed everyone in the mess hall was watching us and I didn’t care. So what if Pops or Captain Harris got angry. I was sick to death of men pushing me around.

The idiot reached for my left leg.

I hit him upside the head with the metal water jug and rammed my boot into his stomach.

“Sonovabitch.” Sergeant Stone staggered backward and shook his head to clear it.

“That was a mistake.”

The menace in his dark brown eyes had me diving under the table.

“You can’t outrun me.”

Maybe not, but I wasn’t planning on running. I kicked him off his feet.

Sergeant Stone crashed to the floor. His merciless gaze locked on me. “You want to play? Game on, Tinkerbell.”

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Damn, he was scarier than Pops when he was riled up. Rolling to the other side of the table, I jumped up and grabbed a plastic tray. The instant he popped up, I hurled it at him like a frisbee.

Thud! It hit Sergeant Stone in the face. Blood gushed from his nose, but somehow, he managed to stay on his feet. He grinned at me.

Shit. I wouldn't last two minutes in hand-to-hand combat with him, and he knew it. Anything I could get my hands on; I threw at him.

With unbelievable ease, Sergeant Stone ducked and dodged the projectiles.

He could give Pops a run for his money.

"I don't want to hurt you," Sergeant Stone said.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. He had a glob of mashed potatoes perched on the top of his head. To make it even better, pieces of corn, gravy, and coleslaw were splattered over his beard and uniform. "Gee, sugar, I don't have a problem hurting you."

His attention suddenly fixed on something behind me.

Had his team shown up?

A hand clamped on my shoulder. I instinctively shifted my weight and tossed the person over my shoulder.

“Hey!” A military police officer smacked the floor.

“Shit! Sorry.”

His partner tackled me, placed a knee in my back and slapped the handcuffs on.
“You are under arrest for assault.”

“Sorry, I thought you were one of the jerk’s buddies.”

The MP pulled me to my feet. “Who started the fight?”

Everyone in the mess hall pointed at Sergeant Stone and in unison said, “He did.”

I let out a sob. “I broke up with him and he won’t leave me alone.”

“Like I would date that vicious little hellcat.” The look of outrage on Sergeant Stone’s face was hilarious.

“See? Just cause he’s a sergeant, he thinks he can do whatever he wants.”

“Cuff him, Andrews. We’ll let the lieutenant sort this mess out,” the MP ordered.

Sergeant Stone’s jaw dropped. “What are you arresting me for?”

“Assault.”

“I never touched her,” Sergeant Stone snarled.

I held out my left arm which had a colorful bruise above the wrist. “Yes, he did.”

Andrews cuffed Sergeant Stone and relieved him of his weapons. “Let’s go.”

Sergeant Stone shot me a withering glare.

I gave him my Debbie Sunshine smile. Gotta say, I really enjoyed our perp walk to the brig. Everyone stopped dead and gaped at Sergeant Stone's food covered uniform. "A Marine's table manners leave a lot to be desired," I called cheerfully.

"Shut it, Reynolds," the MP instructed.

"Yes, sir."

Chapter Five

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The jail was inside a prefab building. There was a small office at the front with security cameras lining the walls. Behind a heavy metal door were five cells. Each cell had a bed, a metal sink and toilet and absolutely no privacy.

The MP removed my handcuffs and locked the cell door. “Your duty officer will be notified of your arrest.”

“Yes, sir.” A wave of weariness rolled over me, and I collapsed on the narrow bunk. I could finally catch up on my sleep.

“You didn’t search her,” Sergeant Stone interjected.

Shit! The last thing I needed was for him to find my derringer and knife. Standing up, I yanked my shirt up and did a slow circle. “Happy now?”

“Damn.” Sergeant Stone’s eyebrows rose. “Are you anorexic? When is the last time you ate?”

Was he serious? He was wearing my chocolate cake. I gave him a one-fingered salute and sat on my bunk.

A grim expression on his face, the MP asked, “Where did you get all those bruises?”

Running from the Taliban, I had tripped and fallen down the mountainside, but he didn’t need to know that. “Where do you think?”

The MP’s eyes narrowed. “What’s your explanation, Sergeant?”

“I never laid a hand on her.”

Which was true, but I wasn't done with the jackass yet. I let out a sob and curled into a fetal position.

“I'm notifying your commander of this incident.” The MP stormed off.

I smiled.

“Hey, Tinkerbell!”

I sighed. Tinkerbell? “Are you always this annoying?”

“By the end of the day, I'm going to know everything about you, and I do mean everything.”

I doubted that, but I was so damned tired; I couldn't think straight anymore.
“Whatever.”

“I'm gonna prove you are the Scorpion.”

“I thought because I'm a girl, I can't be a sniper.” I closed my eyes.

Sergeant Stone shot back, “They say the Scorpion never misses.”

“I don't.” I fell asleep.

“Release her immediately,” Captain Harris shouted. “Did you hear me, Lieutenant Moss?”

Lieutenant Moss said calmly, “I can’t, sir. She has been arrested for insubordination, and two counts of assault.”

“Assault?” Captain Harris sputtered. “Who did she assault?”

“A military police officer and a Marine sergeant.”

With a groan, I opened my eyes and checked my watch. Two hours of sleep wasn’t enough.

“Is that true Reynolds?”

I sat up. “Yes, sir.”

“Why?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time and the MP kinda got in the way.” The cell next to me was empty. They must have kicked Sergeant Stone loose. Would he follow through on his threat?

Captain Harris’s hands balled into fists. “Release her into my custody. I need her for an important job.”

Oh God, they were trying to kill me.

“Find another secretary, she’s not going anywhere,” Lieutenant Moss replied bluntly.

I released a long breath. I got to live a little longer.

A muscle twitched in Captain Harris’s jaw. “I’m taking this up the chain of command.”

The lieutenant shrugged. “You do what you have to do.”

The captain stomped out.

“You don’t look so good,” Lieutenant Moss commented a minute later.

I blinked in surprise. I was exhausted and hungry as hell, but that had become normal for me. “I think I’m a bit dehydrated, sir.”

“I’ll have a medic check you over.”

“Thank you, sir.” Ten minutes later, a cute, red-headed medic showed up.

Under the lieutenant’s watchful eye, the medic examined me. “Her blood pressure is too low, and she’s badly dehydrated. She needs to be admitted to the hospital, sir.”

I did?

“Okay. Let’s go.” With a firm grip on my arm, Lieutenant Moss escorted me down the hallway.

Andrews, the MP I had assaulted, stood by the back door. “All clear, sir.”

I frowned. What the heck was going on?

Throwing a quick look around, the lieutenant practically threw me into the back of an ambulance. “Lay down on the gurney.”

“Okay.” I did as he asked.

The medic shut the back door.

His hand on the butt of his handgun, the lieutenant peered out the back window.

“Are we under attack, sir?”

“We have intel of a possible attack,” Lieutenant Moss said.

The ambulance tore off with sirens blaring.

I wasn't at death's door, so what was up with the sirens?

Five minutes later we pulled up at the field hospital.

Lieutenant Moss threw a sheet over me. "Don't say a word."

"Yes, sir." This was getting weirder and weirder.

The medic opened the back doors and pulled the gurney out.

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I grunted as it hit the ground hard.

“Keep your eyes closed,” Lieutenant Moss ordered.

I closed my eyes as they pushed me into the hospital at a dead run. Was Pops or his creepy boss behind this? Or was this Sergeant Stone’s doing?

“This is the patient I told you about, Doctor Morrison.”

I took a quick peep at Doctor Morrison. He wasn’t much taller than me and he looked as exhausted as I felt.

“I’ll take good care of her. If you’ll wait outside, I’ll examine Private Reynolds.”

Lieutenant Moss pointed a finger at my face. “Don’t try anything. I’ll be on the other side of the curtain.”

“Yes, sir.”

A young nurse came into the curtained area and handed the doctor a clipboard.

Doctor Morrison flipped through the attached papers. “Hmmp. They want me to check you for dehydration, anorexia and multiple contusions.”

“I’m not anorexic. I’ve lost weight because they put me on half-rations. I am dehydrated from a lack of water, and the bruises are from a fall I took.”

“Who put you on half-rations?”

“Captain Harris,” I answered.

“Why?”

I couldn’t say they were trying to break me, so I simply shrugged. “You would have to ask him.”

“Help her remove her shirt, Peggy. I need to look at her contusions.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Before I could move, Peggy yanked my tee shirt off. I bit my lip to keep from crying out. Damn, that hurt.

“You took quite a fall.” Doctor Morrison said as he poked and prodded me.

If he poked me one more time, I was going to punch him.

“I want you to start an IV with a saline drip, I need two vials of blood taken and weigh her, Peggy. According to her file, Private Reynolds has lost twenty pounds since boot camp.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Excuse me,” I interjected. “Could I get a couple of aspirins and something to eat?”

“Peggy will take care of that.” Doctor Morrison walked out. “I need a word with you, Lieutenant Moss.”

I watched them move off. “If you have a vending machine, a candy bar would be great. I have money.”

Peggy grinned and wrapped a blood pressure cuff around my right arm. “I have a stash of chocolate in my locker. As soon as I’m finished here, I’ll get you a couple of bars.”

“Bless you. You aren’t going to put me in a hospital gown, are you?”

“No, as soon as the IV is done, they’re taking you back to the brig.”

“Oh, goodie.”

Peggy grinned and removed the cuff. “Did you really assault Sergeant Stone?”

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“I did.” I quickly put my tee shirt back on. I hated people seeing how skinny I was.

Peggy sighed. “That man is sex on two legs.”

“And he’s hung like a stallion too.”

“You’ve had sex with him?” Peggy stared at me in awe.

“God, no! I just caught a glimpse of him swimming in the nude.”

Peggy asked eagerly, “Did you take any pictures?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Too bad. Let’s get you on the scale.”

Sliding off the gurney, I walked over to the scale and reluctantly stepped on it. Shit! Even with my boots on I was down to a hundred pounds.

Peggy noted it on her clipboard. “I’ll have the mess hall bring you some food.”

“Any chance of some chocolate cake?”

“I’ll ask Doctor Morrison.” Peggy patted the gurney. “Up you go.”

Yawning, I got back on the gurney and watched as Peggy efficiently took my blood and inserted the IV.

Lieutenant Moss pushed through the curtains. “How long will the IV take?”

“About an hour,” Peggy answered.

Lieutenant Moss handcuffed me to the gurney. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Yes, sir.” What a smart ass.

He walked off.

“I’ll see about your cake,” Peggy said.

“Thanks.” I laid back and closed my eyes.

Gunfire woke me. I jerked upright when a woman started screaming for help. Shit! That kinda sounded like Peggy. Pulling the lockpick out of my bra, I unlocked the handcuff and yanked out the IV.

A Taliban goon charged through the curtains. “Allah Akbar!” He threw a knife at me.

I ducked.

His buddy didn’t. A look of astonishment on his face, he stared at the knife embedded in his chest and toppled over.

Rolling off the bed, I yanked the knife out of the dead guy’s chest and returned it to the owner. Making an awful gurgling noise, he slumped to the floor.

The woman screamed, “Someone help me. Please, I need some help here!”

“Shit!” I took the dead guy’s AK-47 rifle and checked the magazine. Damn, there

were only twelve bullets left, and just my luck, the militant wasn't carrying any extra ammo.

"Allah Akbar!" A volley of bullets shredded the curtains.

Laying on the floor, I shot the militant in the legs and duck walked toward the screaming woman.

It was Peggy. She had taken cover behind a desk and was desperately trying to keep a soldier from bleeding out.

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Two militants fired wildly, turning the waiting room into rubble.

How in the hell had they managed to get inside the base? I raised my rifle and took them out. “Are you hurt, Peggy?”

“No.”

Bullets whizzed over our heads and smacked the walls.

Grabbing a handful of the soldier’s shirt, I helped Peggy pull him out of the line of fire.

An explosion rocked the building. A second later, a fierce gunbattle erupted outside the hospital.

Doctor Morrison pushed a gurney up to the wounded soldier. “Keep those bastards from killing anymore of my people, Reynolds.”

“Yes, sir.” I shot a charging militant and took his rifle. Hey, it was fully loaded.

Peggy grabbed my arm and handed me two chocolate bars. “In case you get the munchies.”

“Thank you.” I shoved them in my pocket.

Doctor Morrison picked up the injured soldier and put him on the gurney. “Munchies in a firefight? Seriously?”

I shrugged.

“Don’t get dead,” Peggy shouted over her shoulder.

“That’s the plan.”

A grenade flew through a broken window. I scooped it up and threw it back. Boom! The blast shook the hospital.

A burning pain slashed across my upper left arm. Damn, a piece of debris had hit me. I examined the wound. It was a three-inch gash and bleeding badly. Taking some gauze off a suture tray, I wrapped it around my arm and tied it off.

Kaboom!

I frowned. That sounded like an IED going off. The militants were attacking in force. The fastest way to stop them was to get to high ground. If memory served me correctly, that door would get me to the roof. Gathering as many weapons as I could find, I hurried up the stairs and took cover behind a low wall. I quickly surveyed the area.

Flames and thick black smoke rose from the brig. The bodies of three women with blonde hair were sprawled on the ground like broken dolls, and my barracks was on fire. Horror rolled over me. Somehow Roberts had found out I had enough evidence to put him away for the next four hundred years and he had sicced the Taliban on me. Was my father helping that slimy sociopath? Maybe. Eric Roberts was his boss.

Boom!

I focused my attention back on the battle. Sergeant Stone, his team, and Lieutenant Moss were trapped behind a bullet-riddled Humvee.

I laid down cover fire until they were able to get to safety. I quickly whittled down the number of insurgents. When one rifle ran out of bullets, I seized another, then another, until I was down to two pistols.

The door to the roof flew open.

I rolled behind an air-conditioning unit and raised my pistol.

Sergeant Stone, his team and Lieutenant Moss rushed through the door.

My shoulders sagged in relief. "Got any ammo?"

"I do." Sergeant Stone's gaze took in my bloody arm and the pile of useless weapons. He tossed me a clip for an AK-47.

I quickly inserted the new clip and went back to shooting the attacking militants. The men joined me at the wall, and I had to admit, they were all damned good shots.

Silence suddenly fell.

Was the attack over?

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Sergeant Stone suddenly handed me his sniper rifle. “I need you to take out the Taliban warlord directing this attack. He’s wearing a black turban and robes. He’s standing in the back of a tan truck that’s parked next to the hanger.”

Shit! I knew my charade was over, but I didn’t think it would end this way. “Yes, sir.” I raised the rifle and sighted in on the warlord. He was an older version of Imad Shakur, the warlord I had eliminated.

“24 inches square to the right of the hanger,” Sergeant Stone advised.

I guess he was my spotter. “Copy.” I adjusted the scope. “Range?”

“1,520 yards dial 9.75 MOA,” Sergeant Stone replied.

“Copy.” I tweaked the scope. “Wind?”

“Dial in left 2 MOA.”

I put the crosshairs on the warlord’s head and fired. He toppled off the truck.

“You’re the Scorpion alright.”

“Am I?” A flash of movement caught my attention. I swung the rifle to the left. “Sonovabitch!” It was Roberts. I tweaked the scope but before I could fire, Sergeant Stone pushed the barrel down.

“Who are you aiming at?”

“A CIA asshole by the name of Eric Roberts. He needs killing.”

Sergeant Stone frowned. “Why?”

“He’s behind this attack,” I answered.

“What makes you think that?”

I scowled at him. “Gee, is it because the Taliban are killing any woman with blonde hair? Or maybe the fact they attacked my barracks and the brig too. Roberts won’t stop until I’m dead.” I jumped up and headed for the door. “But the only one dying is him.”

Stone wrapped his arms around me and lifted me off my feet. “Why does he want you dead?”

“He’s getting away.” I tried to break his iron grip, but I could barely wiggle and why did I like the feel of his body against mine?

Stone growled in my ear, “Answer the question, Tinkerbell.”

“I have enough evidence to put him away for the next four hundred years.”

His body stiffened. “Evidence of what?”

“For starters, Roberts drugged your marine and turned him over to the warlord to be executed.”

“And?”

“Roberts is responsible for the Air India flight that went down with several of his

CIA cohorts on it. He's also giving the Iraq military the locations of our troops. Plus, he arranged the Bali and Sadr bombings."

"Where's your proof?"

As much as I hated to admit it, if I wanted to bring Roberts to justice, I needed help. "It's on a microdot I glued to my dog tags."

"What?" Sergeant Stone shifted his hold on me and stuck his big hand down my shirt and searched for my dog tags.

My nerve ending ignited, and I wanted to rub against him like a cat in heat. This was bad. This was really bad. "Hey! Quit groping me, you pervert!"

Sergeant Stone pulled out my dog tags. "Don't get your panties in a twist. You're not my type."

"Hallelujah."

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“Where is the microdot?”

“Next to my social security number.”

Sergeant Stone removed my dog tags and examined them. “I’ll be damned. Tex!”

“Sir?” Tex reminded me of a muscle-bound surfer dude.

“Take care of her arm and don’t let her out of your sight.” Sergeant Stone dropped me like I had a contagious disease.

“Yes, sir.”

Lieutenant Moss walked over to us. “Reynolds is still my prisoner.”

“Not for long.” Sergeant Stone pulled out a satellite phone.

“I notified General Grandville of the situation, and he is sending a team to retrieve her.”

“Reynolds isn’t going anywhere until she’s been debriefed,” Sergeant Stone shot back.

Lieutenant Moss got in his face. “You have no jurisdiction over her.”

Stone typed a code into his phone. “Let’s see what my commander has to say about that.”

I smiled. No one was paying attention to me. I took a step back, then another and another.

No one noticed.

I ducked behind the air-conditioning unit and looked over the side of the building. There were enough handholds I could easily free climb down. I swung my legs over the wall and lowered myself to a small window ledge.

A large hand clamped around my right wrist and Sergeant Stone dead lifted me back onto the roof. "Going somewhere?"

Damn, he was strong. "I have a man to kill."

"Unarmed?"

"I'm never unarmed. Put me down," I snapped.

His cold gaze searched my face.

"Put."

"Me."

"Down."

Stone growled. "You need to learn to obey orders and respect your superiors."

"I'm not a Marine."

"It doesn't matter."

I was suddenly upside down and the bastard was removing my boot knife and derringer. I tried to kick him, but I couldn't get any leverage. "Put me down!"

"Yes, ma'am." He dropped me on my head.

Swinging my right leg out, I knocked Stone off his feet and smiled as he smacked the rooftop hard.

"You little hellion!" He pinned me down.

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A volley of bullets whizzed overhead.

The others returned fire.

“Fuck!” Sergeant Stone rolled off me, grabbed his rifle and started firing at the Taliban.

That had been a big mistake. I leaned my aching body against the wall as everything hit me all at once. I was so damned tired; I couldn’t think straight. A part of me was aware of the blood running down my left arm from our little tussle but I just didn’t care. The Taliban attack had been too well-planned. I knew Roberts was involved, but he wasn’t a military strategist like Pops.

Would I live to see tomorrow? Maybe. Was my father a traitor? Probably, but he had saved that soldier’s life. What would happen when he discovered I had taken his blackmail material? Would I end up in his crosshairs? To my horror, hot tears rolled down my cheeks. Why was I crying? I shouldn’t mourn what I had never had. Was it wrong to want my father to love me, not be my executioner? If he came after me, was I strong enough to kill him? I didn’t know.

Now that Stone possessed the microdot, I had nothing left to bargain with. Would they kick me out of the Army or simply lock me up?

“Did I do that?” Sergeant Stone squatted next to me.

I closed my eyes and ignored him.

“Tex! Get over here.” Stone used his thumbs to wipe away my tears. “Hey, everything is going to be okay.”

My eyes snapped open. “Is your father trying to kill you?”

“Why would he want you dead?” He watched me carefully.

“I stole the microdot from him.”

“Shit!” Stone ran a hand through his thick black hair. “Your father is Matthew Reynolds the CIA assassin?”

Damn, Stone had said he would know everything about me. “Yes.”

“He’s training you to follow in his footsteps, isn’t he?”

“He is.”

Something dark and predatory moved across Sergeant Stone’s face. “You thought the Army would protect you from him.”

“That was the plan, but he showed up at boot camp, made a deal with the General and got me sent to sniper school. Which I passed.”

“And you found yourself in the Middle East basically working for your father.”

I nodded. “That’s when Eric Roberts took an interest in me.”

“Your sniper abilities or sexually?”

“Both.” An evil smile formed on my mouth. “It was six months before he could get it

up again and his nose still looks wonky.”

Stone’s white teeth flashed in a dazzling grin. “I heard someone had neutered him.”

“That’s how I ended up on half-rations and being sent on increasingly dangerous missions.”

The surfer dude knelt beside me and cut off my bloody bandage. “She needs stitches. I can do it, or we can wait until there’s a doctor available.”

“You do it,” I said.

“Yes, ma’am.” Tex pulled out a suture kit.

Stone scratched his beard. “Didn’t your team share their food with you?”

“I don’t have a team. They sent me out alone.”

“Alone?” Tex inquired incredulously.

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That's when I noticed Stone's team and Lieutenant Moss were listening to our conversation. "Yep, eight times."

Stone grimaced in disgust. "Roberts was trying to break you."

"He tried." I rubbed my aching forehead. When had I turned into Chatty Cathy? Stone might be a jackass, but for some odd reason I trusted him.

Lieutenant Moss asked, "What was Captain Harris's role in this?"

I flinched when Tex injected my wound with a painkiller. "Facilitator. My father or Roberts would send him the mission details and he'd put me on a chopper."

"What did they promise Harris?" A muscle twitched in Lieutenant Moss's jaw.

"A promotion to Major and three hundred thousand dollars. He wasn't in his office when I returned, and I doubt he'll cooperate with you."

Lieutenant Moss grimaced. "We found his body two hours ago. He had been beheaded."

"Roberts knows I have the microdot and he's killing anyone who can expose him."

Sergeant Stone's sat phone beeped. "Don't go anywhere. He stepped away to take the call."

Tex bandaged my arm. "All done."

“Thanks.”

“They’re sending a helicopter for us. You’re being evacuated to Kuwait for debriefing,” Stone advised.

I nodded. “I need my guns.”

“We can provide any weapons you’ll need,” Stone countered.

“I’m not leaving without Bertha.”

Stone’s eyebrows rose. “Bertha?”

“Bertha is my modified sniper rifle. She’s the only thing keeping me alive. Please.”

“Modified, huh?”

“My father’s upgrades are one-of-a-kind.”

“I just bet they are.” Stone gestured. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Six

I entered Captain Harris’s office and came to an abrupt stop. The air reeked of bay rum aftershave. “Stop! Roberts has been here recently.”

Everyone stopped and looked around.

Johnson wrinkled his nose. “Damn, what is that smell?”

“Roberts always bathes in bay rum aftershave. He thinks it’ll hide his stench,” I

answered.

“Booby trap.” Rodriquez pointed to a trip wire.

Sergeant Stone knelt and examined it. “Pipe bomb.” He quickly disarmed it. “All clear.”

“Roberts likes his little games.” Walking carefully over to the armory door, I checked it for any more surprises, then typed in my password into the keypad. When it clicked open, I took Bertha off the rack.

“Let’s have a look.” Sergeant Stone held out his hand.

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I reluctantly surrendered Bertha. “My father is a gunsmith who designs all his own weapons.” I strapped on my Sig Sauers and picked up a duffle bag that contained paperwork, ammo, two 1849 Colt Peacemaker revolvers and a hand-tooled leather gunslinger’s belt.

Tex inquired, “Those Sig Sauers modified too?”

“They are.” I handed him one.

Tex whistled. “Nice, what’s in the bag?”

“Ammo and two Colt Peacemaker revolvers,” I retrieved the Sig Sauer and slipped it back into my holster.

Sergeant Stone gave Bertha back to me. “Why do you have two Colt Peacemakers?”

“I’m a quick draw artist,” I replied and waited for a nasty comment.

“Like Annie Oakley?”

“Kinda, but I haven’t tried sharpshooting on horseback yet.”

“You’re full of surprises,” Sergeant Stone said.

He didn’t know half of it.

Lieutenant Moss walked in. “Your helicopter is here.”

“Thanks.” Sergeant Stone put a hand on my back and escorted me out of the office.

I frowned. “Shouldn’t the Huey have a tail gunner?”

“Johnson will be the tail gunner.” Sergeant Stone gave me a narrow sidelong glance. “Let me guess, you can fly a helicopter.”

“Yes, sir. I’m an FAA-licensed pilot.”

“Do you have your license on you?”

I held up my bag. “I do.”

“Did your father teach you?” Tex wanted to know.

“No, my instructor was Chuck Everson. He flew a medevac chopper during the Vietnam war. He’s now a stunt pilot for the movie studios.”

Stone shook his head in disbelief. “Your father is determined to turn you into a super assassin.”

“Over my dead body.” One look at the pilot and I grabbed Stone’s arm. “Is that Reaper?”

Stone glanced at the pilot. “It is.”

“He works for Roberts. He’s really good at making people disappear in the desert.”

“Hit me,” Stone commanded.

“What?”

“Hit me.”

I gleefully punched him in the stomach and yelled, “Go to hell, you bastard!”

Sergeant Stone took Bertha away from me and tossed it to Rodriguez. The next thing I knew I was dangling over his shoulder. “Hey! Let me go!”

“Not a chance. You’re mine now.” He carried me back into the office.

What did he mean by that?

His team followed us.

“You punch like a girl,” Stone said and dumped me on the floor.

I rolled my eyes. “What are we going to do about Reaper?”

“Rodriguez, Johnson and Tex will deal with him.”

“Alive?” Johnson asked.

Sergeant Stone nodded. “I have some questions for him.”

“Your father does excellent work, Chiquita.” Rodriguez returned my rifle.

I grimaced. “My father also made Reaper’s tactical pen. If he goes for it, shoot him.”

“Shoot him?” Stone growled.

“The pen sprays a deadly toxin. Once you inhale the fumes, you’re dead within sixty seconds.”

Stone rubbed a hand over his face. “Does he have the antidote on him?”

I shrugged.

“Search him, carefully,” Sergeant Stone ordered.

Tex nodded. “Thank you, ma’am.” He opened the door. “Let’s go say howdy.” The men filed out and started laughing like something was hilarious.

“Let me see your pilot’s license,” Stone ordered.

I reached inside my duffel bag and pulled it out. “It’s not a fake.”

“Uh huh.” Sergeant Stone examined it, then stuck it in his pocket. “What kind of evidence do you have that Reaper works for Roberts?”

My hand went to my neck. I felt kinda naked without my dog tags. “There are several pages on the microdot detailing his crimes. Roberts uses Reaper’s heroin addiction to control him.”

Sergeant Stone glanced out the open door. “Reaper’s in custody. Let’s go.” He stalked off.

I trotted after him. “Rumor has it, Reaper is hauling forty kilos of heroin.”

“Rumor, huh?”

A smile tugged at my mouth.

“You tapped Captain Harris’s phone, didn’t you?”

“Hey, it was the only way to keep track of what they were planning.” I climbed into the Huey and grinned. Reaper was shackled and gagged. His hate-filled eyes fixed on me, and he shouted something through the rag in his mouth.

“I patted his cheek. “I’m going to dump all your lovely heroin in the same spot you dumped Shaylee’s battered body.”

Reaper struggled wildly to free himself.

Stone’s hand clamped around the back of my neck. “Quit messing with our prisoner.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get this bird in the air.”

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“Yes, sir.” Squeezing around his large body, I sat in the pilot’s chair, fastened my harness and did the pre-flight check.

Stone settled into the co-pilot’s chair. “How familiar are you with the weapons systems on a Huey?”

“There weren’t any weapons on the Huey Chuck used in his flight school.”

Stone grimaced. “I’ll handle weapons controls for now.” He gave me a flight helmet. “Put it on. Your blonde hair stands out too much.”

“Yes, sir.” I pulled the helmet on.

“I’ll do all the talking to the control tower. You will maintain radio silence,” Stone said in my ear.

“Yes, sir.”

Sergeant Stone turned a dial on the control console. “Reaper One requesting clearance to depart.”

The air traffic controller responded, “Reaper One you are cleared for takeoff.”

“You heard him. Let’s go.”

I opened the throttle, pushed on the left pedal and pulled the collective. We rose smoothly into the air.

“The coordinates for Kuwait have been inputted,” Sergeant Stone said.

“Yes, sir.” As soon as we cleared King Faisal Air Force Base, I increased our altitude and speed.

Sergeant Stone relaxed in his seat. “What other secrets are you hiding?”

“I love chocolate, sunsets, and long walks on the beach.”

Stone snorted. “Smart ass. How many languages do you speak?”

“Arabic, Farsi, Dari and some Pashto.” I skirted the village of Al-ghat and frowned when a bright flash of light caught my attention. My horrified gaze fixed on a white contrail. “Shit! Incoming.”

The radar began to flash a warning.

“King Faisal air-traffic control, Reaper One is under missile attack,” Stone snarled into his radio mic.

“Copy Reaper One. I am scrambling two F-16’s to assist you,” the air-traffic controller replied.

Sergeant Stone fired a TOT missile at the incoming rocket. Boom! It disintegrated into a ball of flames.

I increased our speed, trying to get us out of missile range.

A black Cobra helicopter shot up from a date grove and opened fire.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Holes appeared in the windshield and bullets thudded against the

metal.

Stone triggered the M134 mini-gun and slugs pelleted the Cobra's fuselage.

The Cobra's pilot let loose with another deadly volley.

That ass wasn't shooting me down. "Hang on guys, it's gonna get a bit bumpy." I put the Huey into a loop de loop and popped up behind the Cobra. "Blow him to hell Sergeant."

Cursing loudly, Stone unleashed a barrage of lead.

The Cobra banked left, and I suddenly found myself in a dogfight. Doing my best to keep from getting blown to bits, I put the Huey into a series of turns, dives and rolls. I was dimly aware of Stone bellowing at the King Faisal air-traffic controller.

Yeah. Where was our air support?

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A Super Stallion helicopter joined the fight and launched a missile at us. I did another loop de loop and the missile hit the Cobra. Kaboom! It broke apart and pieces of flaming debris rained down on the desert.

Johnson turned the M60 machine gun on the Super Stallion and shredded its tail rotor. Trailing black smoke, it spun wildly and slammed into the ground. A large fireball rose high into the air.

Two F-16 jets did a fly by and one of the pilots announced, "Area is clear of bogies."

"No shit," Tex grouched.

Laughing like a crazy person, I shouted, "Whooooee! That was fun."

"You're fucking nuts," Sergeant Stone grumbled.

"Hey, it's a good day when you can walk away from a firefight in one piece."

Rodriguez hooted. "She's right."

"Why did your flight instructor teach you air combat maneuvers?" Johnson seemed intrigued.

"The movie studio Chuck worked for needed more pilots for their Vietnam war movies. It was fun and the pay was awesome."

Sergeant Stone checked his satellite phone. "What did your father think about you

working for a movie studio?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“You sure about that?” Stone countered.

“No.”

Tex let out a low whistle. “Bet he’ll be pissed when he finds out you were responsible for shooting down two of his helicopters.”

“I didn’t shoot anyone down, you did, and those choppers belong to the CIA.”

“Sonovabitch,” Rodriquez spat.

Sergeant Stone typed rapidly on his phone’s keypad. “How do you know those helicopters belonged to the CIA?”

“There is a list of aircraft Roberts has commandeered on the microdot,” I replied.

“That was some damn fine flying, Reaper One,” a F-16 pilot said in my ear.

I keyed my mic, “Reaper One isn’t flying this bird, but Whiskey Tango Foxtrot is.”

Rodriquez burst out laughing. “WTF is a perfect call sign for you.”

“I gave you a direct order, Reynolds. You were to maintain radio silence. Now everyone knows where you are,” Sergeant Stone growled.

Yikes, he had a point. The lack of sleep was making me a bit loopy. “It won’t happen again, sir.”

“When I give you an order, I expect you to obey it without hesitation.”

“Yes, sir.” God, what crawled up his butt and died.

“What other talents do you possess?”

I frowned. “Talents, sir?”

“Combat skills.”

“Uh, well, I’ve had some demolition training, and I can parachute.”

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Stone jotted it down on a notepad. “Anything else?”

“I’m good with a knife.”

Rodriquez interjected, “Throwing or fighting?”

“Both.”

“Damn girl, you’re downright lethal,” Johnson added.

Out of the blue, Stone asked, “Who are you dating?”

Huh? “Why do you need to know that?”

“Answer the question,” Stone snapped.

I fought down the urge to give him the one-fingered salute. “I don’t date.”

“Ever?” There was a note of disbelief in Stone’s voice.

“My father said it would interfere with my training.”

“Your father is an ass,” Tex said.

“Yes, he is.”

His curiosity evident, Johnson asked, “Other than flying, what do you do for fun?”

Sally, my battle buddy, had gotten me hooked on shopping. “I like to shop.”

They all laughed like I had said something funny.

The radar screen flashed a warning. “Another incoming missile.”

“Whiskey Tango Foxtrot, duck and cover, Razor and Vapor are on the rocket,” an F-16 pilot announced.

I rolled my eyes. Duck and cover. Seriously?

“Rocket jockeys wouldn’t last ten minutes in the field,” Johnson grouched.

In the distance, a fireball erupted.

A sigh escaped me. “Roberts isn’t going to stop until one of us is dead.”

“He’s never tangled with the Alpha Dogs,” Sergeant Stone said. “He’s a dead man walking.”

Johnson hollered, “Hoorah!”

“We are swift. We are silent. We are deadly,” Tex interjected.

Rodriguez bellowed, “Hoorah!”

God save me from testosterone. My stomach clenched when I noticed the oil pressure was dropping. “Houston, we have a problem.”

All the men barked in unison, “What kind of problem?”

“We’re losing oil pressure, and I need to land before the engine shuts down.”

“I’ll notify the air-traffic controller that we’ll need a rescue chopper,” Stone said.

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“Copy.” I looked for a landing site. There. About a mile ahead was a nice flat spot.

Stone tapped the control console. “The engine just failed, didn’t it?”

“Yep.” I clutched the collective pitch lever and changed the slant of the chopper blades.

“Are you going to be able to land this bird?” Stone demanded.

Since the fuselage was shot full of holes and this was my first emergency landing, who knew. “Gonna try, sir.” Gritting my teeth against the pain in my left arm, I did a maneuver called autorotation. It generated enough lift to keep us in the air. The Huey came down vertically, hit the ground hard and skidded along the sand for a good ten feet. I sagged against the seat in relief.

“The engine is on fire,” Johnson warned.

I unbuckled my harness and grabbed the fire extinguisher.

Stone stepped in front of me. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going to put out the fire.”

Sergeant Stone took the fire extinguisher from me. “I’ll do it. Get your gear and move away from the chopper.”

“Yes, sir.” Picking up the duffel bag, I swung Bertha over my left shoulder and ran a

safe distance from the burning Huey. The small fire extinguisher wasn't going to put out that big of a fire.

Reaper moaned pathetically as Tex and Johnson dragged him across the sand.

Huh? Reaper had at least three bullet wounds and from the large blood trail, I didn't think he had long to live. Maybe I was more like my father than I wanted to admit. I couldn't summon an ounce of sympathy for the bastard. He liked raping young girls.

Tex glanced at me. "Your arm is bleeding again."

And it hurt like a mother too. "I think I popped a couple of stitches in the dog fight."

"I'll take a look at it after I stop Reaper from bleeding to death."

"Good luck with that." I noticed Rodriquez taking pictures of the chopper and walked over to him. "What are the pictures for?"

"Evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"How many times a CIA agent has tried to kill you," Rodriquez replied.

"Oh."

The F-16s buzzed us.

They were so low I could see the pilots saluting us. I saluted back as they came around again.

“Don’t encourage them,” Sergeant Stone grumbled.

“Yes, sir.”

Kaboom!The Huey blew.

As pieces of debris fell from the sky, Stone knocked me to the ground and shielded me with his body. The jackass’s actions were totally unexpected, and he weighed a ton. “You’re squashing me,” I gasped.

Stone rolled off me and looked around. “Anyone hurt?”

His men shook their heads.

I watched the Huey burn for a moment and smiled. “Roberts is gonna be so pissed.”

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“You can count on it, Chiquita,” Rodriquez said grimly.

Reaper’s right foot twitched wildly, he exhaled a long breath and stopped moving.

“You can’t question a dead man, but if I were you, I’d check his dog tags for a microdot.”

Sergeant Stone quickly removed Reaper’s dog tags and examined them. “I’ll be damned.”

“No one ever thinks of checking our dog tags for data.”

“Do you know what’s on it,” Johnson asked.

I tapped a finger against my cheek. “Hmmm. According to a credible source, Reaper’s drug dealings, his contacts and a list of all the people he’s murdered for Roberts.”

“Let me check your arm.” Tex squatted next to me and cut off the bandage. “You broke two of your stitches during your aerobatics.”

I shrugged. “I was trying to keep us alive.”

“And we appreciate it, but you need full-time bodyguards,” Johnson said.

“Do not. Yeow!” I glared at Tex. “That hurt.”

Tex got out his suture kit. “It’ll hurt more if I don’t deaden the area.”

“What’s the ETA on the rescue chopper?” My stomach growled loudly. “I’m starving.”

Sergeant Stone handed me a candy bar and his canteen. “We need to work on fattening you up. You look like you’ve been held prisoner by the Taliban for a year.”

Did he think I didn’t realize how awful I looked? All that mattered was I had survived.

“You should have reported Captain Harris’s actions,” Johnson commented.

My temper flared to life. “I did and my basic allowance and pay were stopped.” I hurriedly stuffed the entire candy bar, wrapper included, into my mouth and chewed.

“Stopped? For how long?” Stone demanded.

I took a long drink from his canteen. “Three months so far.”

“Did you contact your paymaster?” Rodriquez gave me another candy bar minus the wrapper.

I took a bite. “Yes, and I got the runaround.”

Whump. Whump. Whump. A Huey appeared in the distance.

Tex bandaged my arm. “Our ride is here.”

“Yippee.” I crammed the rest of the candy bar in my mouth.

Stone shook his head. “We’re not going to take food away from you.”

“You already have. I was eating my first decent meal in three days when you showed up at the mess hall and started bellowing at me.”

Sergeant Stone rubbed a hand over his face. “I apologize.”

“What?” I gaped at him in astonishment. “You’re sorry?”

“Yes, I was unaware of your situation at the time.”

The F-16s buzzed us again and wagged their wings.

“Apology accepted.”

Chapter Seven

The Huey’s seats were narrow and uncomfortable. To make things worse, I was squashed between Stone and Tex. My eyelids drooped as I struggled to stay awake. That surge of adrenaline was long gone, and I was so damned tired.

“Wake up Tinkerbell,” Stone said in my ear.

I mumbled, “Tired.”

“We just landed in Kuwait, and we’ll get you something to eat.”

Food? My eyes popped open, and to my horror, I was leaning against Sergeant Stone’s shoulder. Shit! I shot to my feet. “Sorry, sir, I didn’t mean to touch you.”

Stone gave me an evil grin. “Do you know you snore?”

“Do not.”

“Yeah, you do,” Tex said.

That’s when I noticed the gleam of amusement in Rodriguez’s eye. “Har. Har. Point me toward the mess hall and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Stone shook his head. “Not a chance. Consider yourself part of my team.”

“But I’m Army.” I grabbed my duffel bag and slung Bertha over my shoulder.

“We all work for Uncle Sam.”

Okay, that was true, but they didn’t know how dangerous my father was. “If you hang around me very long, you’re gonna end up dead.”

“We are the Alpha Dogs, and we never run from a fight,” Johnson stated.

“Yeah, I know. You’re swift, silent and deadly, but so is my father.”

“Don’t leave my side,” Stone commanded.

“But...”

Stone leaned down until his nose touched mine. “That’s an order, soldier.”

“Yes, sir.” I followed him off the Huey. As much as I hated to admit it, if I wanted to survive, I needed their help.

A big, barrel-chested Marine with all sorts of medals on his chest waited for us.

We all saluted him.

“At ease.” His gaze locked on me. “Introduce me.”

“General Masters, this is private Tess Reynolds, an Army sniper,” Sergeant Stone said.

The General’s bushy eyebrows rose. “Sniper?”

“Yes, sir,” Sergeant Stone replied.

“Any good?”

Stone nodded. “She can outshoot me.”

“Is that true, private?”

“I never miss, sir.”

The General grunted. “And you can fly a Huey?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Grandville hasn’t arrived yet. Go get some grub and for God’s sake take a shower you all stink,” General Masters ordered.

Stone and his team saluted him sharply and shouted, “Yes, sir.”

I quickly saluted him. Did I stink too?

General Masters turned on his heel and marched off.

I frowned. What kind of lies had Roberts spread about me? Was General Grandville coming here to arrest me or kick me out of the Army? The big question was: Where was my father?

“Let’s go, Reynolds,” Stone barked.

“Yes, sir.” I trotted after him. I wanted a big, juicy burger with fries and some fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy. We entered the busy mess hall, and everyone turned to stare at us.

Stone bellowed, “Never seen a female sniper before?”

“No, sir,” a bunch of Marines shouted back.

“She belongs to my squad. Any questions?”

The Marines hollered, “No, sir.”

I had a few, but one look at the expression on Stone’s face and I decided they could wait.

Mysquaddumped their backpacks on an empty table. I followed suit, grabbed a plate and joined them in line. I eyed the food hungrily. Wow, I could eat breakfast or lunch. What should I start with?

Sergeant Stone took my plate. “She’ll have scrambled eggs, fruit and toast.”

“But...”

“Are you contradicting me, private?”

“No, sir.”

“Good, we wouldn’t want you puking everything back up, would we?”

“No, sir.” The first chance I got, I was putting a scorpion in his bunk. I reached for a bottle of orange juice.

Sergeant Stone took it away from me. “Water only.”

And one in his boot too. “Yes, sir.” I held out my hand for my plate.

“Don’t inhale your food.”

“Yes, sir.” I stomped back to our table and sat. What a jackass. I took a bite of the eggs and groaned. God, they were cooked to perfection.

Sergeant Stone plunked a bottle of water next to my plate. “You forgot your water.” The bastard sat next to me and opened his bottle of beer.

I wanted to stab him with my fork. Mysquad’s plates were piled high with steak, mashed potatoes, gravy and biscuits.

Two fighter jocks strolled in and looked around. Once they spotted me, they yelled, “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot! You are a damn fine pilot for a female.”

“Gee, you’re too kind.” I wondered how they would react if I put a scorpion in their cockpits. Would they scream like a girl? I smiled. Probably.

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The taller fighter jock asked, “You doing anything tonight? I’d like to take you out for a beer and give you pointers on dog fighting.”

Before I could respond, Sergeant Stone glowered at him. “Get lost.”

“I’m Air Force and a lieutenant. So, shut the fuck up, sergeant.”

Stone shot to his feet, towering over the idiot lieutenant. “She doesn’t date. Ever.”

And once again testosterone raised its ugly head.

“Is that true?”

I looked at his name tag. “It is, Lieutenant Foster. Men who want to date me usually end up dead.”

“Dead?”

I nodded. “Yep, I have a CIA assassin after me.”

“A simple no would be sufficient,” Lieutenant Foster snapped.

Tex interjected, “She’s not lying.”

“The attack on King Faisal Air Force Base was another attempt to kill me,” I said and stood up.

“Going back for seconds?” Tex asked with a frown.

“I want some chocolate cake. Ideservesome chocolate cake.”

Johnson nodded. “She does. That was some mighty fine flying.”

“I agree, but you need to drink more water,” Sergeant Stone replied.

“I will.” I got back in line.

Lieutenant Foster followed me and pointed to my modified pistols. “Is this assassin who’s trying to kill you the reason you’re carrying two guns?”

“It is and I can shoot with both hands.”

“They say you’re a sniper, too.”

“I am.”

Three Taliban males wearing military uniforms burst in firing old Russian AK-47 assault rifles. “Allah Akbar!”

Bullets whizzed by me, hitting the metal food stations and the soda machine. Ignoring the searing pain in my left ribcage, it took me two seconds to draw my guns and return fire. The three militants fell to the floor with a bullet hole between their eyes. Thank God, my luck was holding. If the first shooter’s rifle hadn’t jammed, I’d be dead.

Stone, Rodriquez and Johnson cautiously approached the militants and kicked their weapons away and searched them.

Several military police officers rushed in.

“Shooters have been neutralized,” Stone shouted.

The pain in my side grew worse. I pulled up my blood-soaked shirt and sighed. The bullet had left me with a terrific six-inch long gash.

“Sonovabitch! I’m hit.”

I glanced down. Lieutenant Foster lay at my feet with a big hole in his right shoulder.
“You weren’t lying.”

“Nope.” I grabbed some napkins and held them against my injury.

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Foster sat up and pressed a hand to his badly bleeding wound. "I've never seen anyone draw and shoot as fast as you did."

"That's because she's a quick draw artist," Tex said and examined him. "You'll need surgery to remove the bullet."

Two base medics hurried in.

Tex waved at them. "Over here."

Feeling a bit lightheaded, I sat at a nearby table and noticed my napkins were now blood soaked. Great, just what I needed.

A chubby female kitchen worker rushed over to me and handed me several thick dish towels. "Looks like you could use these. Those paper napkins are the cheap kind."

"Thanks." I dumped the bloody napkins on the table and glanced around. Sergeant Stone was talking to General Masters, and no one was paying any attention to me. "Do you think I could I get some chocolate cake?"

The kitchen worker grinned. "Chocolate cures everything, doesn't it?"

"It sure does."

She quickly filled a plate with chocolate cake and set it in front of me. "There you go."

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.” While Tex and the medics worked on Lieutenant Foster, I ate my way through the cake. Thirsty, I automatically reached for a bottle of beer that had been left on the table. Searing pain shot across my ribcage and a yelp broke from me. Damn. That hurt. A lot.

“Fuck!” Tex jumped to his feet. “Why didn’t you tell me you were hit?”

“It’s just a flesh wound.”

“That’s an awful lot of blood for just a flesh wound,” Tex countered.

The next thing I knew, he was cutting off my shirt. “Hey! This is the only shirt I have left.”

“Tough.” Tex gaped at my numerous bruises. “What the hell? Who beat you?”

“I wasn’t beaten, I fell down a mountain.”

Tex shot me a disbelieving look. “Sure, you did.” He cleaned the gash and got out his suture kit.

Sergeant Stone, General Masters, Rodriquez and Johnson crowded around me.

“Was she a prisoner of the Taliban?” General Masters wanted to know.

Stone shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Then where did she get all those bruises?”

I took a deep breath and counted to ten. “I was running from the Taliban, tripped and fell down a mountain.”

“Damn, she’s got great tits,” a soldier commented.

Rodriquez decked him. “Watch your mouth and if you look at her again, you’re gonna need some dental work.”

“Yes, sir.” The soldier scrambled away.

I flinched as Tex stuck the needle from hell into me.

“I thought you could use this.” The kitchen worker placed a green tee-shirt on the table.

I smiled. In bold print across the front of the shirt was: In my defense I was left unsupervised. “Thank you. It’ll keep me from flashing everyone.”

Her gaze swept over Tex as he stitched my gash, and she visibly winced. “Want more chocolate? Or another beer?”

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“No. She does not,” Stone interjected.

The kitchen worker glared at him. “Afraid she’ll get fat?”

Holy shit! Before I could say anything, Sergeant Stone gave her a megawatt smile. “No darlin’, she’s suffering from dehydration and needs to stick to water, but you could box up more cake.”

“Oh. Okay.” Awestruck, she stared up at him and giggled like a schoolgirl. “I’ll go... I’ll do that.” She scurried off.

I snorted. “I bet all you have to do is take your shirt off and smile.”

“Jealous, Tinkerbell?” He turned his sensuous smile on me.

“I’ve seen you naked and your dangly bits aren’t all that special, darlin’.”

Stone’s jaw literally dropped. “Dangly bits?”

“She’s a keeper,” General Masters guffawed.

“I knew someone was spying on us at the lake,” Johnson hooted.

“I was looking for the Taliban and instead I found a bunch of sausage jockeys.”

Stone raised an inquiring eyebrow. “Curious about a man’s body, are you, darlin’?”

“You shot every one of the militants between the eyes,” Rodriquez inserted hastily.

I nodded. “That way they don’t get back up and try to kill you.”

“Can you teach us your fast draw technique,” Tex asked as he bandaged my side.

“Sure.”

General Masters’ phone rang. He glanced down at the screen and frowned. “Get her cleaned up before General Grandville shows up.” He strode off.

The hairs on the back-of-my-neck stood on end when I met Stone’s narrowed-eyed gaze. I had roused his predator. It was almost as if he wanted to eat me. Nah, exhaustion was making me loopy. I wasn’t his type, and he probably just wanted to smack me. Pops had warned me to never ever make fun of a man’s private parts. My bad, but I wasn’t apologizing to the jackass. I stood up. “Where are the women’s barracks?”

“You’re bunking with us,” Stone said.

“What?”

Sergeant Stone smiled evilly. “You are part of the team now, where we go, you go.”

“But...”

“Move it,” Stone bellowed.

“Yes, sir.” Funny black spots danced in my vision, and everything suddenly went black. I was dimly aware of Stone cursing.

Chapter Eight

Pain and the need to pee woke me up. I sat up and looked around groggily. Where was I?

“What do you need?”

I stared up at Sergeant Stone. “Bathroom.”

Stone held out his hand. “I’ll show you the way.”

“Okay.” I took his hand and blinked in confusion. All I was wearing was a baggy green tee shirt. “Where are my pants?”

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“They were covered in blood.” He led me across a hallway and opened a door.

“Oh.” I frowned and pointed. “That’s a urinal.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Why are we in the men’s restrooms? I’m a girl.”

“That you are.” Grinning, Stone guided me over to a stall and opened the door. “In you go.”

“No peeking.” I shut the door.

“No, ma’am.”

I sat on the toilet and did my business. “Are you laughing at me?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Why are you ma’aming me?”

“Because you’re high on morphine and too damn cute.”

Was he being nice to me? No way. I pulled off some toilet paper and stared at it for a moment. “Well, stop it.”

“Are you done, soldier?”

I wiped myself. “Yes.” I stood, flushed the toilet and pulled up my panties. Wait a minute. These weren’t my panties.

“Open the door, Tess.”

I did as he asked. “These aren’t my panties.” I yanked up my tee shirt. “See?”

His grin got bigger. “We got you fresh underwear.”

“Why?”

“Because your clothes were covered in blood.”

“Oh.” I sat on the floor. “Tired.” I laid down.

“No, you don’t.” Stone scooped me up. “You need to take your pills.”

“Don’t wanna.” I laid my head against his shoulder. “Promise you won’t let him kill me.”

“I promise.” Stone sat me on a bed. “Open your mouth.”

“What if I have bad breath?”

“You don’t.”

“You sure about that?”

“I am. Now take your pills.”

I opened my mouth.

Stone dropped two pills on my tongue and handed me a bottle of water. “Swallow them and you can have some chocolate.”

“Okay.” I washed the pills down. “Where’s my chocolate?”

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“In my backpack. I’ll get it.”

A wave of weariness rolled over me. The minute my head hit the pillow I fell asleep.

A hand shook my shoulder. “Wake up, Tess.”

I instinctively kicked out as hard as I could.

The man hit the floor hard and groaned, “Fuck.”

Rolling off the bed, I assumed a fighting stance and my eyes widened in horror. Tex was on the floor cradling his genitals. “Sorry. My bad.”

“Why did you kick him in the nuts?” Stone demanded.

My shoulders slumped. “Part of my father’s training was sending strange men into my bedroom in the middle of the night to attack me. It has made me a bit twitchy.”

Johnson handed Tex an ice pack. “A bit?”

“After I shot three of my attackers, my father stopped that particular training practice.”

“Your father is a monster and we’ll be happy to take him down,” Rodriquez spat.

“My father is an apex predator with no morals. If you get in his way, he’ll kill you.”

Sergeant Stone opened a bottle of protein drink and handed it to me. “Drink this and take your pills. General Grandville is demanding to see you.”

“Like this?” I gestured to my over-sized tee shirt.

“We got you more uniforms, a toothbrush, comb, and some lady stuff from the commissary.” Rodriquez placed a bag on the bed.

“Thank you.” I took my pills and quickly finished the protein drink.” Where do I change?”

“Across the hallway,” Stone replied.

I grabbed the bag and my boots and frowned. “Wait. That’s the men’s room.”

“I’ll stand guard while you change,” Stone said.

“Okay.” I crossed the hallway and peered inside. “Have I been here before?”

“You have.”

Stone put a big hand on my back and pushed me inside. “General Grandville is getting antsy, you been asleep for the last twelve hours.”

“I was?” Holy shit! “My wounds aren’t that bad.”

“You were suffering from dehydration, exhaustion and starvation. The blood loss pushed you over the edge and you fainted.”

I fainted! How embarrassing. Time to change the subject. I held out the neck of my tee shirt and sniffed. “Why do I smell like spearmint?”

“Horse liniment.”

With a frown, I placed a hairbrush next to the tube of toothpaste. “Horse liniment?”

“We’ve been rubbing the ointment on your bruises. Works like a charm. Get dressed.” He walked out.

“Yes, sir.” What I wanted to know was who had been doing the rubbing. By the smirk on Stone’s face, it was him. I used the facilities, brushed my teeth and washed my face. My mental fog finally cleared, and I realized I wasn’t wearing a bra, and my panties were new too. Who had undressed me?

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“What’s taking so long?” Stone bellowed through the door.

I gave him the one-fingered salute, grabbed a bra out of the sack and tried to fasten my bra. “Dammit!” My ribs were screaming in protest, and I couldn’t get the hooks to fasten. “Shit!”

“What’s the problem, Tinkerbell?”

“I’m a little stiff and I can’t fasten my bra.” The next thing I knew, Sergeant Stone was standing behind me and his callused fingers were hooking my bra. My skin was hypersensitive to his touch, and I could feel my cheeks heating. “Had a lot of practice with bras, have you?”

“Removing them, yeah. Putting them back on, not so much.” Stone trailed a finger down my spine.

“Hey!” I jumped about a foot and winced as my left leg spasmed. “Knock it off. I’m not interested in joining your fan club.”

Stone studied me intently for a moment, then nodded. “Not until you learn to trust men again.”

“Maybe when I’m old and gray, but I probably won’t live that long,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Don’t say that. The only one dying is Roberts and your father.” He twirled a finger. “Turn around. You’re moving like a granny, and I need you in fighting form.” He

pulled a tube of ointment out of his pocket.

The last thing I needed was Stone touching me, but he was right. I couldn't fight like this. I turned around. I hoped I didn't do something stupid, like kissing him.

"You took a bad fall. You're damn lucky you didn't break a leg."

I snorted. "That would have really messed up my father's plans."

"Your father needs killing." Stone massaged ointment into my neck and back.

My knees almost buckled. That felt so damn good. "He was a great father until my mother was killed. Now all he lives for is vengeance." Shit! My voice came out all breathy.

"What happened?" Stone's hands slid down my left thigh as he worked the ointment into my colorful bruises.

My pussy pulsed and I fought back a moan. God, I loved the feel on his hands on my body. "She worked for Doctors Without Borders and was killed in a roadside bombing." I balled my hands. Don't touch him. Don't touch him.

"That's tough." He switched to my other leg.

Oh, God. My panties were soaked, my nipples had hardened, and pure arousal thrummed in my veins. I wanted that bastard inside me.

"How does that feel?" He gave me a lewd wink.

"You know damn well how that feels."

He grinned. “You’ve got the color back in your cheeks.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Stone took my new pants out of the bag. “Step in.”

Damn, the command note was back in his voice. With a hand on his shoulder, I did as he asked.

The sergeant pulled my pants up, zipped them and handed me a belt. “There you go.”

“Thank you, sir.” I quickly donned my shirt and boots.

Stone frowned. “You need to do something with your hair.”

One look in the mirror and I agreed. There were pieces of God knows what in my hair and it badly needed combing. I reached back to remove the hair tie and winced.

“You need to let the ointment work. Hold still. I’ll fix your braid,” Stone said. He quickly removed my hair tie, brushed all the crap out of my hair and braided it.

“Where did you learn to braid hair?” Call me curious.

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“I braided my sister’s hair when she was little.”

“Where does your family live?”

Pain flashed across Stone’s face. “When I was fourteen a drunk driver hit our car, I was the only survivor.”

“I’m sorry. I know how that feels.” The memory of my mother’s shattered body flashed across my mind, and I shuddered. That day was forever etched in my mind. In a matter of seconds, my world had been destroyed.

“You were there when your mother died?”

“I was.” It was like it happened yesterday.

“How old were you?”

“Four. There was so much blood.” I rubbed my temples. “My father went mad. He left me there while he chased down the terrorists.”

Stone hugged me gently. “When did he come back for you?”

“Three weeks later.”

“Shit.”

I grimaced. “Tell me about it. Kuwait’s Ministry of Social Affairs put me in a foster

home and my blonde hair drew a lot of attention.”

“I’ll bet. As soon as my grandfather learned about the accident, he came for me. I was big for my age and full of anger. Grandpa took me back to his ranch and put me to work. By the end of the day, I was too tired to get into fights. He taught me all he knew about cattle ranching and rodeoing. When I turned eighteen, he dragged me down to the Marines recruiting center and had me join up. He said they would teach me how to control my aggression and he was right.”

I snorted. “Control your aggression? Seriously? They turned you into apex predator like my father.”

“I was always an apex predator; they taught how to control it.” Stone’s sat phone beeped. He checked it. “Let’s go. Grandville is throwing a fit.”

“I need my guns. Roberts is not going to stop until I’m dead.”

Sergeant Stone smiled as he opened the men’s room doors. “You might be cute as a bunny, but you could give a badger a run for his money in pure meanness.”

“Why, thank you. My father calls it my natural camouflage.”

Rodriguez handed me my gun belt. “We’ve got your back, Chiquita.”

“Thanks.” I strapped on my gun belt, checked my Sig Sauers over, and grabbed Bertha. “Let’s go see what’s got Grandville in such a lather.”

Chapter Nine

The instant we walked into General Master’s office, I knew there was a problem. Both Generals were stone-faced and staring at two Arabic men in business suits. Most

businessmen in the Middle East wore flowing white robes. What kind of scam were they running? They turned to face me and within two seconds my guns were pointed at them. “You so much as twitch and I’ll blow your fucking heads off.”

“Put your guns away,” General Grandville snapped. “They’re with the CIA and are here to arrest Private Reynolds.”

Stone stepped into view. He had his gun pointed at the businessmen too. “What’s the charge?”

“Treason,” General Masters answered.

I laughed. “They aren’t CIA. The one with the nasty scar on his face is Rafi Muhammed. He’s on the Saudi’s terrorists watch list and he’s Eric Roberts hired muscle. The pretty one is Mustafa Jaziri, and he’s wanted for twelve counts of murder in Turkey. The warrant is fake. If you don’t believe me, call CIA headquarters in Langley and verify it.”

His teeth bared in a snarl; Muhammed hurled a knife at me.

Diving to one side, I fired.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

I shot to my feet and stared at Muhammed’s and Jaziri’s bullet riddled bodies. Holy shit!

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My squad holstered their guns.

“Are you hurt?” Stone asked.

I pulled the knife out of the wall. “Nope, missed me by a good inch.”

Rodriguez snickered.

General Grandville scowled. “Did you have to kill both of them?”

“Yes, sir, we did,” Stone said, not an ounce of remorse in his tone. “Roberts and his goons have tried to kill Reynolds five times now.”

My eyebrows rose in surprise. They were keeping count. It was nice having someone watching my six.

Tex pointed at the ink pen in Muhammed’s shirt pocket. “Booby-trapped?”

I took a closer look. “It is. That pen is normally used for suicide attacks. We need to evacuate the building. Now!”

“Suicide attacks? Evacuate? What are you talking about?” General Masters demanded.

Fighting down the urge to run for my life, I explained, “When triggered, the pen spews anthrax into the air. Anyone who inhales the toxin is dead within thirty seconds and one of the bullets might have damaged it.”

“Everyone out!” General Masters bellowed.

We all hurried out of the building and took refuge next to a sandbag covered concrete bunker.

General Masters pulled out his sat phone. “Send a disposal squad to my office to contain an explosive device loaded with anthrax.”

I frowned and sniffed the air. Damn. Was that bay rum?

“What’s wrong?” Stone asked.

“Do you smell bay rum?”

Everyone began sniffing.

“It’s stronger over here,” Tex said, giving a fine impression of a K9 hunting down his prey. He came to an abrupt halt. “Bomb!”

My gaze froze on the timer. There were only nine minutes left before it blew. “Running might be good.”

“That fucking bastard!” Sergeant Stone knelt and examined the bomb. “The bomb has two complex motion sensors, if I attempt to move it, it’ll blow.”

“Roberts meant for the bomb to spread the anthrax,” Johson growled.

“Here comes my bomb disposal guys. They’re the best,” General Masters said.

A flash of light caught my attention on the ridge above us. I casually walked over to the bunker, propped Bertha up on a sandbag and scanned the area. “Sonovabitch.”

“Who is it?” Stone wanted to know.

“Roberts and some of his goons. He also has a grenade launcher. He really doesn’t want anyone to know what’s on the microdot.”

“It’s too late for that. The Pentagon and his bosses at the CIA have a copy.” Stone motioned to his men. “Roberts is a dead man walking.”

The guys trotted over to us wearing their cold-eyed killers’ expressions.

“Roberts is on the ridge above us, and he’s got a grenade launcher. Tex let the generals know and get everyone inside the bunker. It has an air filtration system.”

“Yes, sir.” Tex strolled over to the generals.

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“Rodriquez and Johnson, I want you to get behind him and let me know how many grenades he has,” Stone said.

“Yes, sir.” They moved off.

Stone pulled his Steiner M750rc binoculars from his backpack. “Let get his attention.”

“Permission to terminate?” Please say yes.

General Grandville bellowed, “Absolutely not. The CIA wants him alive. Take out the militant holding the grenade launcher.”

“Yes, sir.” I sighted in on an Arabic male wearing a camouflage uniform.

“26 inches square to the right of the rock,” Sergeant Stone advised.

“Copy.” I adjusted the scope. “Range?”

“1,522 yards dial 9.75 MOA,” Stone replied.

“Copy.” I tweaked the scope. “Wind?”

“Dial in left 2 MOA.”

I put the crosshairs on the militant’s head as he raised the grenades launcher. “Ready to fire.”

Stone's sat phone beeped. "Shit! They have a crate of grenades."

"Take him out," General Masters ordered.

I fired.

As the militant fell backward, the grenade launcher fired. The rocket propelled grenade shot straight up and blew. The concussion knocked Roberts on his butt. Flaming debris rained down on him, setting his hair on fire.

I grinned. "The idiot was using one of those crappy Russian AGS-17 launchers."

Boom! Boom! Boom! Kaboom! The ground shook beneath our feet as the crate of grenades blew.

Fragmented remnants of the grenades fell from the sky, starting small fires.

"Do you think he's dead?"

Stone hit a button on his sat phone. A few seconds later, he barked, "Update. Gotcha. We're coming." His mouth a hard line, he advised, "Roberts is still alive, and he is high tailing it toward a helicopter. Stay on my six."

"Yes, sir." With his longer legs, Stone quickly pulled ahead of me.

Gunfire erupted ahead of us.

Stone dropped to the sand and opened fire.

I crawled up beside him and raised Berta. Bodies littered the sand. Roberts jumped in an old Huey. As the chopper rose into the air, the tail gunner turned the M60 machine

gun on Rodriquez and Johnson.

They hit the dirt.

Oh, hell no. I sighted in on the gunner and squeezed the trigger.

The tail gunner tumbled from the Huey and swung wildly from his safety harness.

I targeted the helicopter again, but it was out of range. “Damn.”

“We’ll find him, Tess, you have my word on that,” Stone said somberly.

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I shook my head. “He’s hurt. He’ll go to ground for now.”

“Fuck!” Stone jumped to his feet and ran to where Rodriquez and Johnson lay unmoving on the ground.

I sprinted after him. Please don’t let them die. Please. I really liked them.

Stone pulled his medical kit out. “Check Rodriquez.” He pressed a gauze pad to Johnson’s head wound.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Johnson mumbled.

I knelt beside Rodriquez and quickly checked his shoulder wound. “Through and through on his left shoulder.”

Rodriquez blinked and tried to sit up.

“Whoa!” I planted a hand on his chest. “Hold still. You’ve been shot.”

“I’ve been shot before.”

“I’m sure you have, but I need to stop the bleeding,” I retorted.

Stone tossed me some gauze pads, and bandages.

Tex ran up, took in the situation and pulled out his medical kit. “I’ve got him. Check the sergeant.”

“What?” That’s when I noticed the blood running down Stone’s right arm. “Sit!” I pointed to the ground.

“Bossy little thing, aren’t you?”

“Sit.”

He sat.

Using my knife, I cut his sleeve and examined his wound. “The bullet’s still in there.”

“Fuck,” Stone gritted.

As I bandaged his wound, two armored Humvees pulled up and General Masters and a dozen Marines got out.

Gee, I wondered where General Grandville went?

General Masters surveyed the scene and turned to the lieutenant standing beside him. “Get the medics up here, Smith.

“Yes, sir.” He grabbed his radio mic.

“Sergeant Harold, I want you and your men to search the area for any more surprises,” General Masters ordered.

The Sergeant saluted sharply. “Yes, sir.”

“And take Private Reynolds with you. She’s a dead shot and knows what these bombs look like.”

Sergeant Harold's gaze surveyed me from head-to-toe. "She's Army, sir."

"Not any longer, General Grandville signed her over to me."

My jaw dropped. What? Was that even legal?

Two ambulances pulled up.

Sergeant Stone stood up. "Private Reynolds is still recovering from her injuries, sir."

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“Sergeant Harold will take good care of her. Now get your ass in the ambulance,” General Masters replied.

Stone shot me a worried look. “Yes, sir.”

“With me Reynolds,” Sergeant Harold ordered.

“Yes, sir.” Two hours later, our search had turned up nothing. As I trudged over the sand, I wiped the sweat out of my eyes. It had to be 130 degrees today.

Sergeant Harold handed me a bottle of water. “Don’t pass out on me.”

“Yes, sir.” I drank the water down in thirty seconds flat.

“When were you injured?”

“Two days ago, sir.”

“What type of injuries?”

“Gunshot wound to my side. I was a little too close to an IED when it went off and needed stitches in my arm. I’m also suffering from dehydration and starvation.”

Sergeant Harold’s eyes widened. “Starvation? Were you a prisoner of the militants?”

“No, sir. A rogue CIA agent was responsible.”

He handed me another bottle of water. “Drink up.”

“Thank you, sir.” My stomach growled loud enough to wake the dead. Ignoring my empty belly, I drank more water and choked. All the Marines were staring at me.

Sergeant Harold grinned. “Let’s get you fed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The Marines piled in the Humvees.

I peered inside. There was nowhere for me to sit. Guess I was walking. I started down the hill.

“Where are you going, Reynolds?” Sergeant Harold hollered.

“There’s no room for me. I can walk. It’s not that far.”

“Like hell. The base was just attacked.” Sergeant Harold glanced inside the last Humvee. “Whitson move your ass over.”

“She’s Army sir and she smells all minty.”

I rolled my eyes. “It keeps the cooties away.”

“Reynolds is one of ours now. Am I clear?” Sergeant Harold demanded.

“Yes, sir.”

Sergeant Harold motioned to me. “Get in.”

“Yes, sir.” I climbed in and perched on the edge of the seat. Whitson was an enormous black man. I gave him my Debbie Sunshine smile when my stomach rumbled loudly. “I’m so hungry I bet I can out eat you.”

Whitson laughed. “Twenty says you can’t.”

“Deal.” I held out my hand.

Whitson shook it. “Easy money.”

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The Humvees pulled to a stop by the mess hall, and everyone got out.

I chewed on my lower lip. Without the proper credentials, I wouldn't be able to eat. I needed to find Stone and the guys.

"Reynolds, get your ass over here," Sergeant Harold yelled.

I walked over to him. "I don't have a basic allowance card, sir."

"Don't worry about. Get in line. I'm paying."

"Thank you, sir." The smell was heavenly. I wiped the drool off my chin. So much food, so little time. It wouldn't be long before Stone sent one of the guys to look for me. Grabbing a plate, I filled it with fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy and biscuits. I took a seat next to Whitson.

"That's a lot of food for a little girl."

A hand plucked my plate off the table. "Yes, it is," Tex said.

"But I need to gain some weight."

"Not like this." Tex placed a plate in front of me that was filled with vegetables and grilled fish.

"Aw, c'mon."

“You can have chocolate cake for dessert.” Tex replaced my bottle of beer with water.

“Fine.”

Tex sat down next to me and ate my fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and biscuits.

The bastard was also drinking my beer. I took a bite of the fish. Hmm, pretty good. “How are the guys doing?”

“Good.”

“That’s it?”

“We have a meeting with General Masters in two hours. Eat up.”

Boy, did I have a lot of questions to ask. “Okay.” I ate everything on my plate and realized I was sandwiched between the two men. “Can you scoot over a bit, Tex. I want to get my cake.”

He shifted his body.

I gave him the stink eye. “I might be skinny, but I’m not that skinny.”

He moved another inch.

“Seriously, dude.” I managed to squeeze out with my empty plate. I got back in line and eyed all the cakes. Hmm. Which one did I want? German Chocolate or Devil’s food or Black Forrest or pineapple upside-down cake? I got all of them and piled the plates on a tray.

Tex's eyebrows shot up.

I gave him the stink eye. There was no way in hell, he was stealing my cakes. I sat down at an empty table and started eating.

Whitson and Tex moved to my table.

"You touch my cakes, and I'll stab you with my fork," I warned.

Whitson roared with laughter. "I believe her."

Tex nodded. "She's not as cute and cuddly as she looks."

"The apple pie is my favorite," Whitson said.

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“I’ll try it next.” Relief flooded me when Stone, Rodriquez and Johnson walked in. Nah, it was more of a badass strut. They loaded up their plates and joined our table.

Whitson nodded at Stone. “What’s a woman doing on a Force Recon team?”

Hmm. I was a bit curious about that too. I kept eating.

“She’s my sniper,” Stone answered.

Whitson’s eyebrows shot up. “Sniper?”

“Her call sign is Scorpion,” Stone replied.

I assumed my father’s predatory expression. “When it’s that time of the month, you really don’t want to piss me off.”

Heads swiveled in my direction.

“Just kidding,” I called.

Stone shook his head. “No, she’s not. Reynolds has a mean streak.”

“Yeah. She likes shooting men in the balls,” Rodriquez added.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing when every man in the mess hall cupped their genitals.

Whitson guffawed loudly. "I like you."

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me," I replied.

Stone glowered. "Manners."

"Yes, sir." I ate my cakes and was contemplating getting more or maybe a piece of apple pie.

Tex shook his head. "No."

"But..."

Stone interjected, "You can't fly if you're puking up your dinner."

He had a point.

"You can fly?" Whitson inquired.

"Yep."

Stone stood up. "Let's go. We need to get cleaned up before the meeting with Masters."

Like little ducklings, we followed him out of the mess hall.

"Under no circumstances, are you to leave the barracks without us," Stone commanded as we entered our assigned room.

"Yes, sir."

A gleam of amusement in his eyes, Stone said, "I need you to watch our six while we clean up."

"I'll stand guard in the hallway, sir." Ogling all that fine male flesh would lead to touching and other stuff.

Johnson rolled his pelvis. "We're not shy."

"You've seen us naked before, Chiquita." Rodriguez said.

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“I have, and if something came up, I’d hate to get all flustered and shoot it.” I stroked the butt of my gun.

They stared at me for a moment.

I smiled. “And we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

“No, ma’am.”

Grinning like a loon, Tex grabbed his pack and headed for the men’s room. “She’s got your number.”

“That she does,” Johnson said and picked up his backpack. “No hard feelings?”

I smiled. “No hard feelings.”

“It would be like doing my sister,” Rodriquez said with a shudder and followed Johnson out.

I knew I wasn’t sexy but sister. Seriously?

Stone leaned down and whispered in my ear. “You’re not my sister.”

The carnal hunger in his gaze had me backing away.

“Don’t worry, Tinkerbelle, I’m a patient man.” Stone walked into the men’s room.

I fanned myself. Lordy, could Stone turn on the sex appeal. I just wished he meant it.

A door opened.

I pulled my guns.

General Masters walked into the barracks. I holstered my weapons and banged on the door. "The general is here."

"Stall him," Stone ordered.

"Yes, sir." One look at the fury burning in the general's eyes and I saluted him smartly.

"At ease," he barked.

I crossed my arms behind me. "The men are cleaning up, sir, and will be right out."

"About fucking time."

Holy hell! He was beyond pissed and I bet General Grandville had something to do with it.

The men's room door opened, and the guys hurried out and saluted Masters.

I choked back a laugh. Half of Stone's face had a beard, the other half didn't.

"We have a traitor in our midst," General Masters stated.

Oh, God, what had Roberts done now?

“Relax Reynolds, it’s not you.”

A sigh of relief escaped me. “General Grandville, sir?”

“Yes. Did you ever wonder how you were transferred to the Middle East so quickly?”

“General Grandville made a deal with my father.”

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“Not quite.” General Masters ran a hand over his face. “Roberts was blackmailing General Grandville. It seems Grandville likes little girls.”

Shit! “I didn’t know that sir.”

“It was a well-guarded secret. Roberts knew your father has records of his illegal dealings.”

“And if he had control of me, he thought he would have control of my father,” I finished.

“Exactly.”

Sadness welled up in me. “I’m a useful tool to my father. Nothing more.”

“Roberts wants you and your father dead. I’ve just learned he has put a million-dollar bounty on each of you. Every terrorist and mercenary in the Middle East are looking for you.”

Horror knotted my stomach. Holy hell! I needed to find a place to hide, but where?

“The CIA has teams hunting for Roberts, but until he is captured, he’s not going to stop trying to kill you. Wherever you go, Private Reynolds, chaos follows. Two bases have been damaged and one helicopter destroyed.” General Masters’s gaze settled on Stone. “I’ve approved your plan.”

Sergeant Stone smiled. “Thank you, sir. You won’t regret it.”

“I have a chopper standing by. Good luck.” General Masters saluted us and walked out.

Rodriguez interjected, “What plan?”

“Pack up your gear, we’re going on a road trip,” Stone replied.

A big smile formed on Johnson’s face. “Bulldogging?”

“With a little jump chump thrown in,” Stone answered.

Color me confused. They were acting like kids promised a trip to Disneyland.

“Move it, Reynolds.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter Ten

To my dismay, I wasn’t piloting the chopper. Some old geezer was. His orders were to drop us off and leave. About forty-five minutes later a private airfield with a single asphalt landing strip came into view. A top-of-the-line Learjet was parked on the runway. Next to a lone palm tree was a fuel tanker truck. About ten yards behind it was a metal shed with a busted door. I surveyed the area for any sign of hostiles. All I saw was an endless sea of sand that stretched from horizon to horizon.

The minute we touched down, a slender black male with dreadlocks appeared in the doorway of the Lear jet. He wore a white silk shirt, black pants and combat boots. I eyed his abundant gold jewelry. Yeow! A little over the top and the fact he was flaunting it meant he wasn’t as harmless as he looked.

“Everyone out,” Stone ordered.

“You’re sure about him?”

“I am.” Stone climbed out of the Huey and walked over to him.

“That is Kamous, a Nigerian warlord,” Tex said.

To my surprise, the warlord hugged Stone, and they did this complicated fist bump thing. “Why is he helping us?”

“The sergeant rescued him from an Iraqi prison.”

I let out a whistle. Color me impressed. “How many men did he lose?”

“None,” Rodriquez answered.

“None?”

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Johnson grinned broadly. “Not a one. He freed the prisoners and blew the prison to smithereens.”

Stone motioned to us. “He’s got a bottle of fifty-year-old whiskey waiting.”

“Grab your gear,” Tex told me and hurried after his squad.

I didn’t join them. I was allergic to whiskey, and they needed time to do a little male bonding. Slinging Bertha over my shoulder, I picked up my pack and smiled at the pilot. “Thanks for the ride.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

I stepped away from the Huey and watched it fly off. The back of my neck itched like crazy. Something was wrong. I scanned the area again. Was I being paranoid? Maybe. Maybe not. I caught a glimpse of the guys being held at gunpoint and ducked under the airplane. Shit!

“Why are you doing this Kamous?” Stone snarled.

“They have my family.”

Dammit! Sounded like something Roberts would do. Time for a little distraction. I pulled my boot knife and jabbed it into the jet’s front tire. It hissed nicely as it deflated. I fished around in my pack and pulled out the grenade I had taken off a dead militant. I thought it might come in handy someday, and it had.

I sprinted over to the fuel tanker. The gauge showed it was almost empty. I blew out a breath of relief. If the tanker was full, it would blow all of us to kingdom come.

Someone shouted angrily, “Find the woman. Roberts wants to watch her die.”

I peeked around the fuel tanker. Two heavily armed goons exited the jet.

I waved at them all friendly like. “I need to pee. Don’t leave without me.”

“Come woman.” The goons raised their weapons and started toward me.

Pulling the pin on the grenade, I tossed it over my shoulder and ran like hell. Please, please don’t blow until I’m inside the shed. I dove headfirst into the flimsy metal structure and a thunderous explosion rocked my world.

Thunk! Bap! Thunk! Thunk! Bap! Pieces of metal bombarded the shed. Shit! It sounded like the roof was going to collapse. Thick, black smoke billowed in through the door. Time to leave.

“Tess!” Stone shouted. “Where are you?”

Hacking up a lung, I stumbled out of the shed and looked around. Wow! Chunks of burning metal covered the ground. I hadn’t expected such a big explosion.

Stone sprinted up to me. “Are you hurt?”

“What?” The ringing in my ears muted everything.

“Are you hurt?” Stone’s hands skimmed over me.

I rubbed my left ear. “I can barely hear you.”

“Where did you get the grenade?”

Why was he scowling? I had just saved his ass. “Snakes?” I looked around. “I don’t see any snakes.”

“Cut the act.”

Coughing violently, I stumbled over a piece of metal. The smoke was making it difficult to see.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Stone muttered and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Easy. There are two bodies to the west of you.”

Yep. One of the goons had a piece of metal protruding from his stomach. The other had a gunshot wound to the chest.

Rodriguez stood guard by the stairs. He took one look at me and yelled, “Tex get your gear.”

“The front tire is flat,” Kamous hollered.

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I glared at him and stroked my guns. “You can’t take off without a front tire.”

“Do you know what you have done?” Kamous’s hands balled into fists.

“I stopped you from killing my squad.”

Stone’s hand closed over my right hand. “Roberts kidnapped his wife and little girl.”

“Oh. Why didn’t you say so? I know where all of his hidey holes are. We’ll find them.”

“Was that info on the microdots?” Stone asked.

“No.” I started coughing again.

Stone practically carried me up the stairs and put me in a chair. “She needs oxygen, Tex.”

I stared at the heavily tattooed man duct taped to a chair. It was hard to tell what nationality he was. The look in his weird white eyes gave me the willies.

Tex placed an oxygen mask over my mouth and nose. “Breathe.”

I nodded. The tattooed man kept staring at me like I was a piece of Godiva chocolate he really wanted to eat. If he wasn’t gagged, he would be licking his lips. “Stop looking at me.”

The jerk eye-fucked me.

My temper flared to life. I yanked off the mask and swung the oxygen tank at his head.

Thunk! He slumped over.

Stone growled. “What in the hell is wrong with you?”

“I don’t like the way he’s looking at me.”

My squad carefully dropped chocolate bars in my lap.

“We needed him awake to find out where Kamous’s wife and child are,” Stone snapped.

I sucked in some oxygen. “They’re in New Zealand.”

“Why do you think that?” Kamous demanded.

“The gray mud on his boots has a sulfurous stink. Mango groves always smell like rotten eggs. Plus, he has yellow manuka pollen on his pants, which is only found in New Zealand’s North Island. I know for a fact that Roberts has a house on stilts in the middle of a mango grove. It’s about a mile south of Lake Matheson. It’s his favorite interrogation place, because no one can hear his victims’ screams and getting rid of bodies is easy.” I inhaled more oxygen.

Rodriquez interjected, “I’ll call Jenkins and see if he can get us some satellite pictures of the area.”

“We’ll need to commandeer an aircraft for a HALO parachute jump too.” Stone eyed

me. “You can do a high-altitude jump, right?”

“Yes, sir.” Okay, I had only done it once, but he didn’t need to know that. Right?

“Let me see if I got this right. Your father not only trained you to be a sniper, a helicopter pilot, he also taught you commando skills and then he sent you to school to become a CIS technician too?” Johnson inquired.

I dropped the oxygen mask. “Yep. I’ve had four semesters of crime scene evidence classes.” I picked up a candy bar, ripped the paper off and happily ate it.

“I have a spare tire in the cargo bay,” Kamous exclaimed. He grabbed my face, kissed me hard on the mouth and charged down the stairs.

My left hand dropped to my gun. “If he does that again, I’m shooting him.”

Stone just shook his head and followed Kamous out of the jet.

“You continue to surprise me.” Tex knelt beside me. “I need to take your blood pressure and listen to your lungs. Do not shoot me.”

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I raised my eyebrows in mock surprise. “Me? Shoot you? Never happen.”

Tex snorted.

I ate another candy bar while Tex moved his stethoscope around my chest.

Rodriguez frowned. “Did your father ever let you have fun? Go to parties? Have friends?”

“No,” I crammed an entire candy bar into my mouth. I was through talking.

“Your blood pressure is good, but you need to stay on the oxygen for another twenty minutes,” Tex said.

I mumbled, “Okay.”

A black smear across his mouth, Kamous charged up the stairs. “Buckle up, little one, we are going to pay Roberts a visit.” He leaned down. “But he is mine to kill. Are we clear on that?”

Before I could swallow my mouthful of chocolate, Tex’s hands clamped down on my wrists and he whispered, “Nod your head.”

I did.

“Good.” Smiling brightly, Kamous entered the cockpit, and settled in the pilot’s seat.

I watched Kamous confidently go through his pre-flight checklist. Thank God, he knew what he was doing. I did not want to get stuck trying to land a Learjet.

Sergeant Stone closed and secured the outer door. “Can you fly a fixed wing aircraft, Tess?”

“I’ve taken some lessons.” I gestured at the cockpit. “But only in a Beechcraft. Nothing as fancy as a Learjet.”

Stone took the seat next to me and fastened his seatbelt. “Kamous might have been raised in Our Lady of the Lake Catholic orphanage, but he is a vicious fighter. If Roberts has harmed his wife or child, he will hack him and his crew to pieces. Don’t get in his way.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I mean it Tess.”

“Roberts deserves a bloody death. I won’t stop Kamous.”

“That’s my girl.”

His girl? As if.

The tattooed man jerked upright. His gaze fell on me, and he went nuts, trying to break free of the duct tape.

I could only make out bits and pieces of what he was yelling, and boy, did he have a potty mouth. I raised the oxygen tank.

“No!” Stone bellowed.

“But...”

“Do you want to be duct taped to the seat?”

I lowered the tank. “No, sir.”

Stone glared at me. “We need to interrogate him, and we can’t do that if you knock him out again.”

“Yes, sir.” What crawled up his ass and died.

Stone spouted something in a language I didn’t understand.

The tattooed man literally froze.

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The Learjet taxied down the runway and lifted smoothly into the air. Once we were at cruising altitude Stone turned to me. “This jet has a shower.” He pointed at a door. “While we interrogate Moses, go get cleaned up.”

“Cleaned up? Do I have chocolate on my face?”

Tex handed me a mirror.

I held it up. “Holy hell!” My face, hair and uniform were covered in soot. That explained the black stuff on Kamous’s mouth. I handed the mirror back to Tex, grabbed my gear and headed for the bathroom.

“You won’t need Bertha,” Johnson said.

The memory of a masked man attacking me in the shower flashed across my mind. “You would be surprised.” I shut the door and looked around. The room was the size of a closet. Both the toilet and sink were solid gold. Was Kamous rich enough to install real gold fixtures? Maybe. Or was this the jet stolen from a Saudi prince two months ago? I ran a hand along the white marble vanity and opened a drawer. It was filled with shower gel, shampoo, mascara, face cream and makeup.

I opened the bottle of shower gel and sniffed. Nice.

A muffled shriek sounded from the cabin.

I guess the guys had started their interrogation. I stripped down, stepped into the itty-bitty shower and turned the water on. I yelped as the icy cold spray hit me.

“You okay in there?” Rodriguez yelled.

“Just hunky-dory.” The water heated up to tepid. I grabbed the bottle of shower gel and quickly washed all the soot off. Thankfully, the shelf on the wall held shampoo and hair conditioner. By the time I was done, the water was frigid again.

Shivering from the cold, I quickly dried off and caught a glimpse of myself in the full-length mirror. I was still too damn skinny, but my bruises were fading.

Stone bellowed, “Need any help hooking your bra?”

The squad roared with laughter.

“No.” Stone was such a jackass.

Tex cackled, “You’re sure?”

“Positive.” I rubbed some of the face cream on my sunburned skin and it immediately felt better. Scooping up another handful, I rubbed it all over my body and sighed in relief. This stuff was great. I’d have to buy some.

Someone knocked on the door. “If you need help, just ask,” Stone said quietly.

“I don’t. Go away.”

“Okay.”

I fastened the hooks in front of me, slid the bra around until the cups were under my breasts, and pulled it on. Ha! That fixed that problem, but my hair was another story. I dried it as best as I could and put it in a ponytail.

The jet began to descend rapidly.

What the hell? I hurriedly dressed. Was the jet having mechanical problems?

The aircraft shook violently as it hit turbulence.

Whoa! I stumbled backward and hit the shower. What the hell was going on? I took a cautious peek at the cabin.

“Stay put, Tess,” Stone shouted, opening the cabin door.

Dark storm clouds shot by as air rushed into the jet.

“Holy shit! Are you crazy?”

The tattooed man was laughing like a madman. “You will all die. Die! Die!”

Climbing ropes attached to their waists, Tex, Johnson and Rodriguez hurled the tattooed man out of the jet.

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As he fell, he kept laughing.

Kaboom! An explosion rocked the Learjet.

I hung on for dear life. How had the tattooed guy managed to get ahold of a bomb?

Stone shut the cabin door and leaned against it for a moment.

“That was too damn close,” Tex said.

Johnson dropped into a seat. “How do you even search for something like that?”

“Like what?” I demanded.

Stone straightened. “A body cavity bomb.”

“Roberts put a bomb in him?” I stared at the sergeant in horror.

“Yes,” Rodriguez replied.

I sank down on a chair. “I know Roberts is a monster but that’s just...” My voice trailed off.

“Evil,” Tex finished.

I nodded. “Didn’t someone try and off a Saudi prince that way?” Call me curious.

“A Houthi militant. He created a bloody mess, but he was the only one that died.

In case I ever ran into this situation again, I had a few questions. “How did you know he had a bomb in him?”

“A flashing red light appeared in the middle of his chest,” Rodriguez said, removing the rope around his waist.

Stone grabbed a bottle of whiskey out of a glass cabinet, unscrewed the top and took a long drink. “And he started ticking.” He handed the bottle to Tex.

Tex drank some and passed it to Rodriguez.

Rodriguez took the whiskey bottle and drained it.

“Hey! You didn’t leave any for me,” Johnson protested.

The sergeant pulled out another bottle and handed it to him.

Johnson unscrewed the top and started drinking.

I snatched the bottle away. “Seriously guys, we have a woman and child to rescue, and you can’t do it drunk.”

“Yeah, we can,” Stone drawled arrogantly.

I sighed. They probably could. “Let’s not. I scare easily.”

The men started laughing.

Stone’s satellite phone beeped. He pulled it out of his pocket, and grimaced.

“You gonna have to tell him what happened,” Rodriquez said.

The sergeant gave him the one-fingered salute and answered it. “Stone. Yes, sir. Our ETA to Hawke’s Bay is three hours. I understand, sir. This is an off the book covert operation. Yes, sir, King Saraki is involved. Roberts kidnapped his daughter and granddaughter.” Stone rubbed his forehead. “I’ll try, sir. Who’s the pilot? I agree, Jeb Wilson is a good soldier.” Stone stared at the ceiling for a moment. “Yes, sir, I’ll keep you informed.” He stuffed the phone back in his pocket, grabbed the whiskey bottle and took another drink.

“The general isn’t happy about King Saraki’s involvement, is he?” Tex asked.

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Rodriguez interjected. “Would you be? Saraki’s a vicious tyrant.”

“Masters is furious, but our government wants access to the bitumen deposits on his lands. Wilson did a recon of the mango grove. There are eight heavily armed mercenaries guarding the stilt house. He has the satellite pictures and our gear.” Stone screwed the lid back on the whiskey bottle. “We have three hours to come up with a battle plan.”

I raised my hand.

“What is it, Tess?”

“Is there anything to eat? I’m starving.”

Stone grinned. “I’m sure we can find something.”

Chapter Eleven

Hawke’s Bay airport is small, isolated and surrounded by wetlands. Kamous landed the Learjet and taxied over to a metal hanger Jeb Wilson had rented for us. He shut down the engines. “Copy tower.” Removing his headset, he walked out of the cockpit with a wild look in his eyes. “The King’s plane landed behind us.”

Stone handed him the bottle of whiskey. “How many men did he bring with him?”

“Twenty.” Kamous guzzled down some booze. “He is also very interested in your female.”

Stone's worried gaze settled on me.

I frowned. "Wait a minute. You're talking about me?"

"Yes," Kamous nodded. "Sergeant Stone has publicly claimed you."

Oh yippee. I bet that had pissed off my father too. "Why would the King be interested in me? I'm not beautiful or sexy."

"You are blonde and an American."

"So?"

"The King has married eight blonde American women. He likes breaking their spirits."

Gee he sounded a lot like Pops and Roberts. "He can't make me marry him."

"After a few weeks in the pit, you will do whatever he wants. Pray he does not discover you are the Scorpion; he will take you even if that means killing your man," Kamous said grimly.

Over my dead body. "My father might have something to say about that. He's a CIA assassin and he's very good at what he does."

Kamous glanced at Stone. "Is this true?"

"It is and do you really think I would let the King take her?"

Kamous shrugged. "You are outnumbered."

I glanced out the window and did a double take. An obese, black man wearing a flowing neon green robe exited a cargo jet. I raised my binoculars to get a better look at him and shuddered. Blue tribal tattoos covered the man's face making him appear demonic. His dreadlocks poked out wildly and reminded me of angry snakes. Fifteen soldiers in camouflage uniforms followed him across the tarmac. They were carrying enough weapons to start a small war.

"Kamous, is that the King?" I pointed at the large black man.

"It is."

"Shit!" Taking the bottle of whiskey away from Kamous, I gulped half of it down and wheezed, "God, this stuff is nasty."

Stone stared at me thoughtfully. "What are you up to, Tinkerbell?"

"By the time I'm done, the King will not want anything to do with me." I put all my weapons in the restroom and stood behind Stone.

The guys were once again wearing their stone-cold killer expressions as King Saraki wobbled up the stairs. He snarled at Kamous, revealing sharp pointy teeth. "You allowed my daughter and granddaughter to be taken."

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“I was in Ghana buying weapons for your army when Eric Roberts’s mercenaries attacked. He slaughtered the guards and took them.”

The King bared his freaky teeth again. “What does he want?”

“Her.” Kamous pulled me into view. “Dead.”

King Saraki’s eyes lit up. “The Scorpion! You will bring me great honor.”

“I already have a job with the United States Army,” I said.

“I have never had a soldier for a wife.” His eyes roved over me. “You are too skinny. I need something to hold onto when I am fucking you.”

The first chance I got, I was shooting him in the balls.

Stone interjected, “Private Reynolds is a highly trained sniper, and a valued member of my team.”

“General Grandville will sell her to me.”

For the right amount of money, that fucking traitor would. A quick look around and I knew if we had to fight our way out, someone might be killed or severely injured. Time to go with plan B. I glued myself to Stone’s side, wrapped an arm around his hips and gazed up at him adoringly. “I can feel our baby moving inside me.”

For a fleeting moment, a strange yearning filled Stone’s eyes. “Can you?”

“Want to feel the little guy kick, snookums?”

Stone leaned down and his mouth claimed mine in a kiss so carnal my knees almost buckled.

Rodriguez let out a low whistle.

Stone lifted his head, and my eyes widened at the hunger on his face. I could almost believe he wanted me.

“My woman and child are not for sale,” Stone declared emphatically.

The King bristled. “I will have her and there is nothing you can do to stop me!”

I could feel the bile rising in my throat. Oh yeah there was. I took a quick step forward and puked all over King Saraki’s fancy robe.

His screech of horror was music to my ears, and I emptied my stomach on his boots.

“Get her away from me! Get her away from me!”

Grinning like a loon, Stone hurriedly stuffed me in the bathroom. “Stay put.”

“Yes, sir.” I rinsed the yuck out of my mouth and listened to the King’s melt down. It seemed he had a bad case of germaphobia. I got a new toothbrush out of the drawer and scrubbed my teeth. God, I hated the taste of whiskey.

Saraki’s shouts stopped abruptly, and I cautiously looked out.

His vomit covered robe, and boots lay on the floor.

I opened the door further and a giggle escaped me. Saraki stormed across the tarmac, naked as the day he was born. I cocked my head in disbelief. He had ugly human eyes tattooed on each butt cheek. Huh? The all-seeing ass?

“Shit! I thought we would have to fight our way out,” Tex said.

I sighed in relief. “I can’t believe Plan B worked.”

“I am also astounded,” Kamous announced.

Johnson shook his head. “Whiskey makes you puke?”

“Yep, I’m allergic to it.”

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“I can’t believe King Saraki is leaving before he knows his daughter and granddaughter are safe,” Rodriquez added.

Kamous rubbed his jaw. “He has over two hundred children and females have little value.”

“If he shows up again, I’m neutering him,” I stated.

Every inch a predator, Stone said, “I’ll help.”

“And I,” Kamous said.

His gaze focused on King Saraki’s retreating soldiers, Rodriquez inserted, “Me too.”

“Count me in,” Tex responded.

King Saraki stomped up the cargo ramp.

His soldiers followed and when the last man was inside, the ramp closed.

Johnson let out a humorless laugh. “He’s cutting and running.”

“Huh? I thought he was a cold-blooded killer who never backed down from a fight.”

Kamous grabbed the whiskey bottle. “It’s been ten years since Saraki has gone into battle.”

“From the size of the scar on his left hip, someone botched a hip replacement surgery. Saraki’s lucky he can still walk,” Tex said.

The cargo jet taxied down the runway and we watched it take off.

When they didn’t drop a bomb on us, I waved at the departing jet. “Bye-bye and your penis is the size of a pickle.”

The guys groaned and passed the bottle of whiskey around.

Stone handed me a bottle of water. “Drink up, the humidity at Lake Matheson is eighty percent.”

“Oh yay.” My stomach roiled unpleasantly. The puke covered clothes stank to high heaven and the last thing I needed was to start vomiting again. “Got any plastic bags? I need to clean that mess up.”

“No, I will do it,” Kamous said. “You did the impossible. Without firing a single shot, you made King Saraki retreat.”

I bowed. “It was my pleasure. How did you meet your wife?”

Kamous smiled fondly. “Aisha ran me down with her jeep. Once I had healed from my injuries, I hunted her.”

“Oh. How romantic.”

A grizzled, white male peered into the cabin. “Gotta say I’m impressed all of you are still breathing. The last time Saraki visited New Zealand he left a pile of bodies behind.”

“We have a secret weapon.” Stone held out his hand. “I’m Sergeant Alexander Stone and we’re the Alpha Dogs.”

The old guy shook his hand. “Jeb Wilson. I’ve got your supplies, and the satellite photos you asked for.” He wrinkled his nose. “You got a dead body in there?”

“Nah, I got air sick.” I picked up my gear and carefully stepped over the mess on the floor.

Jeb moved out of my way as I hurried down the stairs. “I didn’t know the brass allowed females on a Force Recon team.”

“I’m special.” I surveyed the area, looking for any of King Saraki’s soldiers. My shoulders sagged in relief. I didn’t see any.

Stone planted a firm hand on my back. “C’mon sweetheart, we have a mission to prepare for and I want to know all about your HALO jumps.”

Sweetheart? I wish. Stone was the one man who could probably stand up to my father and live to talk about it.

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The sergeant snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Start talking.”

“I’ve parachuted from 5,000 feet twelve times. My first HALO jump was from 15,000 feet.”

“Were you jumping into combat situations?”

“Just the HALO. My father was sent to terminate Abu Islamiyah on the Philippine Island of Siargao, and he brought me along for backup.”

“And?”

I gave him my Debbie Sunshine smile. “I didn’t land in a tree. I didn’t break a leg, and my father terminated his target.” I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell him I had landed in a bog, and it had taken Pops an hour to pull me out.

“How old were you?”

I winced. He just had to ask. “Fourteen,” I mumbled.

“Fourteen! Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.”

Tex butted in, “The question should be: Have you done a HALO jump since then?”

“No, just skydiving for fun.”

Stone rubbed the back of his neck. “When I finally meet your father, I’m going to beat the living hell out of him.”

“That’s not a good idea. My father fights dirty.”

“So do I.” He stomped into the hanger.

Tex caught my arm. “I’ll go over all the safety protocols with you.”

“Thanks.”

Chapter Twelve

Dread knotted my stomach as the Cessna Caravan rose into the air. General Masters had called an hour ago to inform us King Saraki’s cargo jet had been hit by a surface-to-air missile twelve nautical miles from New Zealand’s South Island. There were no survivors.

If Eric Roberts was responsible, were we walking into a trap? Probably, but the guys didn’t seem concerned. All that testosterone made them think they were invincible, and they pretty much were.

Kamous was adamant a rival warlord was to blame. Hmm. Like him? Had Kamous somehow managed to plant a bomb on the King’s jet? Maybe.

Me? I was sure my father had something to do with it. Why? Heisa CIA assassin. My father certainly hadn’t done it to protect his only child. Nope. My guess was Saraki had crossed him and that was always a death sentence. Pops had to maintain his reputation.

Jeb’s calm voice sounded in my helmet’s earphones. “Prepare to jump.”

Stone slid open the door and the wind buffeted us.

“I hate skydiving,” Kamous grumbled.

I fastened my chin strap. “It’s pure freedom.”

“You are as crazy as they are,” Kamous shot back.

“Nah, I’ve got them beat.”

Rodriguez checked my oxygen bottle again, turned it on, and gave me the thumbs up.

I pulled my mask into place. My squad was becoming the family I never had. I would die for them.

“Go,” Jeb instructed.

Tex jumped first.

I was next up, and the others would follow behind me.

Stone tapped my shoulder.

“Yee-haw!” I leaped from the plane and dived toward the jungle below us. When I reached 10,000 feet my altimeter beeped. Arching my back, I spread my arms and legs to slow my descent. With my night vision goggles, everything was crystal clear.

The guys took positions around me.

“You’re an adrenaline junkie,” Stone growled in my earpiece.

“And you’re not?”

Rodriguez laughed. “She’s got you there, Sarge.”

“No deviating from the plan, Tinkerbell.”

“I won’t.” But, hey, shit happened. Jeb’s recon had revealed the mercenaries got drunk every night like clockwork. Stone’s plan was to attack at midnight when the idiots’ reflexes were dulled by fatigue and alcohol.

At one thousand feet, I pulled the ripcord. The parachute deployed and I drifted

toward our landing zone which was an island marked with a big fluorescent green X. The tension in my shoulders lessened. No one had shot at us. If Pops was in the area, he would have killed the Alpha Dogs by now.

My eyes widened in horror when I floated over a dead tree. Hanging from its broken branches were ginormous webs filled with huge spiders. Tugging on my parachute line, I quickly changed my angle of descent and missed it by ten feet.

A shudder shook me at the thought of crashing into them and having a zillion creepy crawlies on me. Ugh. I came in behind Tex and landed perfectly. I gathered up my chute and watched the others do a straight-down descent known as a “dump in”. Only professionals with lots of experience could pull it off.

Tex grimaced. “Did you see that tree full of spiders?”

“I did.”

“Stay away from it. The spiders are poisonous.”

“Won’t be a problem.” I eyed the slimy water surrounding the small island. It appeared to be about six to eight feet deep, and dozens of empty beer bottles floated on the surface. The mercenaries were a bunch of slobs.

Stone, Rodriquez, Kamous and Johnson rolled up their chutes and stuffed them behind moss covered rocks. Since they were swimming to the stilt house, they were wearing wet suits and rubberized boots. The men literally bristled with weapons. Add in their combat helmets, night vision goggles and they appeared almost alien.

“Do you have your perch selected?” Stone asked.

I pointed at a large mango tree with a thick tangle of cylindrical roots. “That one. No

spiders and there are a couple of stout limbs that'll hold my weight.

"It'll do." Stone cupped his hands. "I'll give you a boost."

Slinging Bertha over my shoulder, I placed my right boot in his hands, and he launched me into the tree. "Shit!" I frantically grabbed a branch. It was like being shot out of a cannon.

"Are you in position?" There was a hint of amusement in Stone's voice.

"I am, sir." Since I had already attached Bertha's night vision lens, I flipped up the goggles and laid on my stomach.

"How many enemy soldiers are at the stilt house?" Stone's deep, gravelly voice sent shivers down my back.

I carefully inspected the building. "Two are patrolling the porch and dock. One is on the roof, and I can see three more inside the house.

"Copy that." I watched the men slip into the water and vanish.

A spider crawled along my branch.

I jerked out my boot knife, chopped it in half and flung it in the water. Ugh.

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Silent and deadly, Stone rose out of the water, raised his silenced handgun and fired twice. There were muffled thwaps and the men fell into the water.

The guy on roof called, “Sam? What’s going on?”

Thwap! The man toppled off the roof and hit the water with a loud splash.

Gunfire erupted.

A child screamed.

A woman cried, “Kamous!”

The sudden silence was jarring.

Something moved in the shadows.

I focused on the ominous form. A man, bleeding from a head wound, raised his pistol. I fired.

He toppled into the water.

Stone stepped into view and gave me the ok hand signal.

Whew! That had been a little too close. I carefully studied the house for more enemy combatants. There were none.

I smiled. Kamous was raining kisses on a woman and child. The love on his face almost brought me to tears. I wanted that. The whole shebang. Marriage, children, and a place to call home.

Standing next to a rickety table, Rodriquez and Stone rummaged through a thick pile of papers. The rest of the squad checked the dead.

A thunderous roar sounded in the distance.

Airboats. Shit! It was too soon to be Jeb. I swung my scope to the north. Racing through the mango trees were two airboats full of heavily armed mercenaries. Dammit! Roberts wasn't with them.

I clicked my radio mic, "Alpha One, we have two airboats inbound with eight hostiles."

"Slow them down, Alpha Five."

"Copy that." The idiots hadn't noticed the massive spiderweb in front of them. At their current speed, I should fire about... Now! I pulled the trigger twice, splintering the rotted wood.

A huge branch swung down. It clobbered the mercenaries in the first boat, knocking all but one of them into the water. The airboat zoomed off with the pilot trying to fight his way free of the webbing. Bam! The boat crashed into a tree.

A massive curtain of webbing engulfed the second boat. Horrified shouts filled the night as the mercenaries fought to get free of the sticky spider silk and the attacking arachnids. The airboat raced past my island, careened off a mango root and went airborne. The boat rolled and bodies hit the scummy swamp. Sploosh! Sploosh! Sploosh! Sploosh! The airboat smacked down on some rocks and the propeller

churned the water violently.

Huh? Guess it was stuck. One shot took out the engine. The mercenaries weren't using it to escape on.

"Well done, Alpha Five," Stone commented.

"Thank you, sir." I quickly scanned the water and to my surprise several spiders had hitched rides on the mercenaries swimming for their lives.

A loud crack echoed around the swamp.

Three seconds later, a bullet whizzed by my head and embedded in the tree. Crap! A sniper had pinpointed my location. How had I missed him?

"Where is the shooter, Alpha Five?" Stone demanded.

Hell, if I knew. As I dropped to the branch below me, my night vision goggles caught on a broken limb, stopping me dead. I hung there for a moment, trying to breathe and fighting to get my helmet's strap to release.

I pushed the button again and again. Funny black dots were dancing in my vision when I suddenly fell. I slammed into a thick branch, rolled off it and plummeted to the next limb. I wrapped my arms around it and hung on for dear life. Holy hell. How come I wasn't dead? Had the squad taken the sniper out?

My breath coming in painful gasps, I looked around. No sign of the squad or the sniper.

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My helmet sailed by me, hit the ground and rolled over to fluorescent green X. I might as well have a flashing neon sign that pointed out my exact location. But, on the good side, I still had Bertha and my pack.

A volley of bullets turned the branches above me into kindling. I flinched as splinters of wood peppered me. That hurt. A lot.

Stone's gruff voice bellowed from my helmet. "Alpha five respond."

"Would if I could."

More gunfire raked the tree.

Something wet trickled down my forehead. If I didn't want to die, I needed to make a run for it. Reaching inside my backpack, I took out my last grenade, pulled the pin and hurled it in the direction of the shooter.

Boom!

The barrage of lead stopped abruptly.

I dropped to the ground. The moonless night made it impossible to see the shooters. Taking a deep breath, I did a fast tuck and roll and took cover behind a huge mango root. Were they dead or just playing possum?

Several mercenaries charged out of the water, firing wildly.

Aiming at the muzzle flashes, I shot back.

Someone grunted in pain.

The water churned off the shoreline, followed by smacking thuds. Was my squad fighting the mercenaries?

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of movement. Spinning, I fired my guns, but they just clicked. Shit! I was out of bullets. God, what a rookie mistake. I hurriedly took out a new clip.

A heavily accented male voice taunted, “Out of bullets, are you not? You killed many of my men. For that I will gut shoot you and leave you to die a slow and painful death.”

The idiot was standing on the fluorescent green X giving me enough light to see him clearly. I pulled my boot knife and hurled it.

It impaled in the man’s throat. His eyes widened in shock, and he toppled over.

“I’m not planning on dying today.”

“Don’t shoot me, Tess,” Tex said from behind me.

I jerked in alarm and glared over my shoulder. “I need to put a bell on you.”

Tex’s white teeth flashed in a grin.

“I’m glad to see you.”

His grin faded. “Looks like you have a few more owies.” He pulled out his medic’s

kit.

“A few.”

Stone shouted, “Clear.”

Rodriguez tossed some glow sticks down. “Ay, chihuahua!”

“I’ll be damned,” Stone said, removing my knife from the dead guy’s neck. He cleaned the blood off and handed it to me. “Do you know who that is?”

“Nope.”

“That’s Boris Petrov, a Russian assassin with over two hundred kills.”

I winced as Tex treated my cuts. “Okay.”

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Johnson laughed. “You have no idea how famous he is.”

“Not a clue.”

Clapping sounded from my helmet. “Congratulations Tess, you just killed the most wanted man in the world. An assassin I’ve been chasing for over ten years.”

“Shit!” I shot to my feet and slowly scanned the swamp. When I felt that familiar itch on the back of my neck, I stopped. He was in that tree, and he could easily kill all of us, if he wanted. I picked the helmet up. “Why are you here, Pops?”

“I’ve come for my errant daughter,” Pops answered. “A lot of people want you dead, and it’s my duty to protect you.”

A humorless laugh broke from me. “Your duty? Please. You need me for another one of your missions.”

“Come with me now and the Alpha Dogs get to live a bit longer.”

A cold fury engulfed me. “If you harm any of them, I will hunt you down and kill you.”

Pops laughed. “Will you now?”

“Yes. I’m done with you. Stay away from me and mine.”

Stone took the helmet from me. “What kind of father are you? You sent Tess behind

enemy lines, alone, and on missions even my team would have a difficult time accomplishing. You cut her rations until she's literally skin and bones. Plus, you've done nothing to stop Roberts from trying to kill her."

"My daughter is a highly trained soldier who can take care of herself. Captain Harris and General Grandville have paid for their mistakes. I will find Roberts and deal with him," Pops snapped.

Curiosity got the best of me. "Did you shoot down King Saraki's cargo jet?"

"No, let's just say Saraki kidnapped the wrong American."

The roar of more airboats sounded in the distance. Hopefully, it was Jeb and our backup.

"Come with me now, Tess, and I'll keep you safe," Pops promised.

"I think I'll pass. The Alpha Dogs are the only reason I'm still breathing."

"Do blood ties mean so little to you?"

"When all hell breaks loose, I know the Alpha Dogs will be fighting at my side, and they will never ever leave me behind. Can you say the same?"

Stone wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Tess belongs to me now."

I smothered a groan. That was guaranteed to piss Pops off.

"This isn't over," Pops said menacingly.

"Oh, but it is. You come anywhere near Tess, and I will kill you."

Pops sneered. “Challenge accepted.”

“I’m not afraid of you, old man.” Stone’s voice was edged with steel.

I rubbed my aching forehead. Testosterone was the bane of my life.

“You will be. You will be,” Pops vowed.

Whump. Whump. Whump. A Huey appeared overhead, and a blinding white light lit up the area.

“What the hell? Who is that?” God, I hoped it wasn’t more mercenaries.

Stone smiled. “A CIA retrieval team. They parachuted in behind us. The CIA is very anxious to talk to your father.”

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My neck stopped itching. “He’s gone.”

“Your father won’t get far,” Stone stated.

“Wanna bet?”

Sure enough, the manhunt for my father was a complete bust. The CIA hunters were furious and wanted to take me into custody. General Masters put a stop to that. The hunters left in a huff and took Petrov’s body with them.

“They’re going to claim they killed Petrov,” Tex grouched.

I shrugged. Like I cared.

“You don’t want the million-dollar bounty on Petrov?” Johnson asked.

Flying for the movie production company paid well and I wasn’t hurting for money. “Nope. They’re welcome to it.”

“Petrov has a very large family,” Stone pointed out. “The hunters will soon become the hunted.”

Jeb guided his airboat up onto the shoreline. “Your jet is ready to go.”

“Thanks.” Stone hugged me tightly. “C’mon, I’m taking you home.”

Home. That single word filled me with such longing.

Chapter Thirteen

Stone shook me awake. “We’re landing in Yuma in an hour, and you need to get dressed.”

“Dressed? What’s wrong with what I’m wearing? I don’t think your cows are going to mind.”

“We’re going to the Silver Spur Rodeo,” Tex said. “You can’t wear your blood-stained camo there. You’ll freak people out.”

My eyes widened when I realized my entire squad were dressed like cowboys right down to the boots and hats. Where in the hell had the cowboy gear come from? I sat up. “Why are we going to a rodeo?”

“Hector signed us up for bull riding,” Rodriguez exclaimed happily.

Like they didn’t have enough excitement in their lives. “I don’t have anything to wear, but my blood-stained uniform.”

Johnson handed me a bag. “We had Jeb buy you a dress and some sandals before we left.”

“A dress?” I stared at the bag in horror. “I don’t wear dresses.”

“You do now,” Stone interjected. “Go put it on and use some of that makeup too.”

“But...”

Stone used his command voice, “Now, soldier.”

“Okay, fine.” I picked up the bag and grabbed my backpack. They had lost their tiny little minds. I stomped into the bathroom, slammed the door and stripped off my uniform. Instead of riding bulls, they should be concentrating on fortifying the ranch. The CIA hunters still hadn’t found Roberts or Pops yet.

I took a cautious look in the bag. Oh, how pretty. I lifted out a turquoise sundress dotted with tiny daffodils. This I wouldn’t mind wearing. I hadn’t felt like a girl in forever. I put it on and stared at myself in the mirror. Except for my cuts and bruises, I looked good.

“Don’t forget to shave your legs. There’s a razor in the bag too,” Stone bellowed.

My temper flared to life. I yanked open the door and gave him the one-finger salute. “I’ve been too busy trying to stay alive to worry about my appearance. I know how to be a girl, but it’s obvious you weren’t taught any manners.”

“I apologize.” Stone’s gaze roved over me. “Even with hairy legs, you’re a beautiful woman.”

Tex groaned. “Is that the best you’ve got Sarge?”

“I’m out of practice.”

No kidding. “Apology accepted.” I shut the door and stared down at my legs. They were kinda hairy.

“Thirty minutes until we land, Chiquita.”

“Okay.” I quickly shaved my legs and underarms, then turned my attention to applying makeup the way Sally had taught me. My hair I left in a long braid.

Hmmm. I met my evil gaze in the mirror. If they wanted to be cowboys, why couldn’t I be Annie Oakley? Reaching into my backpack, I pulled out the hand-tooled leather gunslinger’s belt, strapped it on and slid the two 1849 Colt Peacemaker revolvers into the holsters. I opened the door and stepped out.

“Let me guess, you’re Annie Oakley,” Stone said drily.

I gave him my Debbie Sunshine smile. “I am.” I dropped my pack next to Bertha.

“Buckle up, Annie. We’re landing.”

I took the seat across from Stone. “Other than bull riding, what’s the plan?”

“Watch the events, then some dinner and dancing at Cowboy’s Haven,” Stone’s voice was a low rumble.

My shoulders sagged. “I don’t know how to dance.”

“We’ll teach you,” Tex said.

“But you’re gonna have to leave the guns behind,” Johnson warned.

I smiled at him. “Okay, dancing sounds fun.” I stroked a finger over my dress. “I need to thank Jeb for the dress.”

“It looks good on you,” Rodriquez complimented.

“Thank you. Are all of you in the bull riding event?” Call me curious.

Rodriquez grinned. “We are, it’s one hell of a rush.”

“Maybe I should try it.”

The guys shouted in unison, “No!”

“But...”

“No way in hell are you getting on a two thousand pound Brahma bull. You don’t even know how to ride a horse,” Stone snapped.

“Okay, okay, I get it.”

The jet set down smoothly and taxied toward a gate in the executive terminal.

As soon as the aircraft came to a stop, Stone opened the cabin door and secured the steps. “Hector’s waiting for us.”

I knew Hector and his wife Rosa managed the ranch while Stone was away. Tex had told me about their lifelong friendship.

Stone's face split into a wide grin when he spotted a Hispanic male in his sixties. The old guy was wearing a black cowboy hat, a red shirt, jeans and boots. "Which bull am I riding, Hector?"

"Diablo," Hector answered, and his eyes widened when he spotted me. "Is this your woman?"

I let out a squawk. "What? No! I'm a member of his squad. Nothing more."

Stone dropped an arm around my shoulders and kissed my cheek. "She's a little shy."

I jammed my elbow into his stomach and smiled at his grunt of pain. "The sergeant has been hit in the head too many times." I hurried down the steps before Stone could retaliate and held out my hand. "Hi, I'm Tess."

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“A pleasure to meet you, Tess.” Hector shook my hand. “I see Alexander hasn’t been taking good care of you.”

“It’s not his fault. A lot of people want me dead.”

“I cannot believe that.” Hector escorted me over to a red van and opened the passenger door. “A beautiful woman is to be protected and cherished.”

Cherished? Sadness rolled over me. My own father hated me and the chances of someone cherishing me weren’t good. “I’m a soldier, Hector, who has made some dangerous enemies. I fight or I die.”

“You are not alone anymore, Tess,” Stone stated firmly.

I turned to face him. Stone was every inch a warrior and I knew he would fight to the death for me. He was also too damn good looking, and his sex appeal was off the charts. I wanted, no I needed him in my life. Oh, my God! I was in love with the bastard. How had that happened?

A knowing smile curved Stone’s mouth. “Get in the car, Tess. It’s time for some R&R.”

“We are the Alpha Dogs,” Tex shouted as he put our gear in the back of the van.

Johnson hollered, “Hoorah!”

“We are swift. We are silent. We are deadly,” I interjected, climbing into the car.

Rodriguez bellowed, “Hoorah!”

“Dios Mios, have you been drinking?” Hector threw a worried glance over his shoulder and started the engine.

“A beer or two,” Stone answered.

Hector frowned. “Franklin Doss is working the rodeo. Do not start a fight with him.”

“Can’t promise that.”

Curiosity got the better of me. “Who is Frankin Doss?”

“He’s a Yuma County Sheriff’s deputy, who thinks wearing a badge gives him the right to do whatever he wants,” Stone replied.

I grimaced. “I’ve met a few of those.”

“Stay away from him Tess, he has a thing for pint-sized blondes,” Stone instructed.

“Yes, sir.” As we drove down the street everything seemed foreign. There were no cold-eyed men in turbans, and I didn’t have to worry about incoming enemy fire. People moved freely and none of them were armed to the teeth. God, I had been in the Middle East too long.

The streets were clogged with cars heading toward the rodeo arena. Sidewalk vendors had set up tents and were selling everything from hats, to boots, to food. I eyed the tents wistfully. It has been so long since I had gone shopping.

Hector parked the van. “I signed up for bronc riding. My slot is at two.”

I stared at him in alarm. Wasn't he kinda old to be doing shit like that?

"Does Rosa know?" Stone asked.

Hector scowled. "No, and you're not going to tell her."

Stone rubbed his jaw. "You know she's gonna find out."

"And she gets mean when she's angry," Johnson pointed out.

Rodriguez added, "We'll be lucky if all she does is serve us burnt chicken for the next two weeks."

"I might be old, but I'm still a man." Hector got out of the car.

Tex watched him stalk off. "Who's he riding?"

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“Dunno, but I’ll find out,” Stone said.

My attention was caught by more vendor tents. I walked over and eyed the colorful shirts on display. All my clothes had burned in the barracks fire, and I needed everything.

“C’mon Tinkerbell, you can shop later.” Stone placed a white cowboy hat on my head and handed me a pair of sunglasses. “You need these to keep the sun off.” He took my hand and led me through the arena gates.

I liked the feeling of his fingers intertwined with mine.

“You are drawing a lot of attention, Chiquita.”

I looked around. Sure enough, everyone was staring at me. “This is Arizona. Everyone is allowed to carry weapons. What’s the big deal?”

“It’s like seeing Bambi with big, sharp teeth,” Johnson responded.

“Bambi? I don’t appear that harmless.”

Stone snorted. “Yeah, you do.”

“Until we look into your eyes.” Tex shivered. “And we see death looking back.”

I gave him a one-fingered salute. “Not true.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered why men give you such a wide berth?” Johnson asked.

“Gee, maybe it was because I hadn’t showered in a week or two.” My nose wrinkled. Talking about icky. The smell of popcorn mixed with cow dung and horse piss was downright awful.

“You’ll get used to the stench,” Tex commented.

I wasn’t so sure about that. My head swiveled as I took in everything.

Horses, huge bulls and cattle filled the corrals. Old wooden bleachers surrounded the arena. There were only a few seats left. “Where are we going to sit?”

“Hector got us seats in the rich folk section.” Stone pointed to an area covered by an awning.

“Oh, okay.”

Stone handed me a ticket. “You have seat A3. Head on up. We need to check in with the arena director.”

“Try not to get stomped on by the bulls.”

Stone grinned. “Where’s the fun in that? If anyone gives you a problem, kick their asses.”

“Yes, sir.” I saluted him sharply.

Big grins on their faces, my squad strutted off.

Testosterone made men crazy and stupid at the same time. I took my seat and people

watched. The petting zoo was full of kids having a blast. It was so weird seeing women without burkas and smiling happily. What stood out the most was the lack of fear.

An older woman took the seat next to me. She smelled like roses and her bright red hair was piled high on her head with two white feathers protruding from the top. Her ginormous breasts threatened to pop out of her low-cut green velvet dress. She reminded me of a saloon girl from the 1800's.

“Who has been beating on you, honey? Is that why you're carrying those pistols? Do you even know how to use them?”

I gaped at her in surprise. She was actually worried about me. I gave her a reassuring smile. “I was in a car accident, and I use the pistols in my act.”

The woman's green eyes studied me intently. “Act?”

“I'm a quick draw artist and a sharpshooter.”

“You any good?”

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I smothered a grin. The people sitting behind us were listening to our conversation.
“Yes, ma’am. I’m the best, and I never, ever miss.”

“I apologize for babbling on without introducing myself. I’m Jolene Hardy and you are?”

“Tess Reynolds.”

“Nice to meet you, Tess. My husband runs the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, and we’ve been looking for an Annie Oakley act.”

“Really?”

Jolene pointed. “Here comes my husband now.”

A man in his sixties with long white hair and beard walked toward us. His beer belly strained the buttons on his red plaid shirt. The man’s fringed leather pants hung low on his hips and his gun belt was the only thing keeping them up. An 1878 Colt six-shooter hung on his right hip.

A coyote howled.

I looked at the corrals. My squad was staring at me. I gave them the okay hand signal.

“That’s a bunch of dangerous looking men, honey,” Jolene said.

“They are my... ah, family. There here to do some bull riding.”

“You don’t see women doing anything that crazy, now do you?”

I laughed. “No ma’am.”

“Who’s your new friend, darlin’?”

“This here is Tess Reynolds and she’s our new Annie Oakley act.”

“Wait! I haven’t agreed to anything. I have a full-time job.”

“We can work around that.” He thrust out his hand. “Howdy, Tess. I’m Buffalo Bill Hardy.”

I shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Buffalo Bill’s gaze fixed on my guns. “Are those 1849 Colt Peacemakers?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Want to sell them?”

I shook my head. “Not a chance. I need them for my act.”

“I can’t change your mind?”

A high-pitched almost feminine voice snarled, “What are you doing here, old man? I trespassed you.”

“You can’t trespass me. I own the arena,” Buffalo Bill snapped.

Frowning, I turned my head, and my jaw dropped. I had been expecting a woman not

a six-feet-four, muscled-bound male wearing a Yuma County Sheriff's uniform. I looked at his name tag. Shit! Franklin Doss in the flesh. I took a quick peep at the corrals. There was no sign of my squad.

"I'm the law. Git or I will arrest you," Doss sneered.

The people in the seats behind us booed loudly.

A man yelled, "You're a damned bully, Doss."

"Go harass someone else," another person called.

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Anger flushed Doss's cheeks. "I'm gonna arrest all of you for disturbing the peace."

"Try it and see what happens," a bald man challenged.

Doss eyed them warily and pulled the portable radio off his belt. "David-Forty I need backup at the rodeo. I have a dozen people disturbing the peace."

"Copy David-Forty," the dispatcher responded.

Jolene pulled a bulky, brick-like cellphone out of her purse. "You are not arresting anyone. I'm calling the sheriff, and having you fired."

"The hell you are, bitch." Doss jerked the phone out of her hand and tossed it in a trash can.

Buffalo Bill grabbed Doss's left arm. "Don't talk to my wife that way."

Doss pulled back his right arm and punched him in the face.

Buffalo Bill's head snapped back, and he fell across the bleachers. He wiped the blood off his busted lip and tried to stand up.

Doss pulled out his cuffs. "Now you're under arrest for assault."

"Assault? What assault," I asked.

"You bastard, you punched him!" Jolene hit Doss on the head with her purse.

Doss dropped like a rock.

Everyone cheered and clapped.

I stared down at him. “What’s in your purse, Jolene?”

“My derringer. Is he dead?”

I knelt and took his pulse. “No, but it might be a good idea for everyone to leave before he wakes up.”

The people in the stands shook their heads stubbornly.

A woman shouted, “Not going anywhere. It’s about time Doss gets what’s coming to him.”

“Ain’t leaving either,” a teenage boy said.

A black man built like a tank snarled, “That bastard needs a good beat down.”

“I don’t run,” Buffalo Bill snarled. “But I am getting my buffalo gun.” He stormed off.

“Wait, honey!” Jolene sprinted after him.

Crap. I tried howling like a coyote.

A little boy looked up at me. “You okay, lady?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” I howled again.

“You sure? You sound like a strangled dog.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “I’m trying to howl like a coyote.”

“Oh. Why didn’t you say so?” The kid threw his head back and howled.

Damn. He was spot on. “Where did you learn to do that?”

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He shrugged. “Don’t know. Just can.”

“Do it again but louder?” I held out a ten-dollar bill.

He snatched the bill. “Yes, ma’am.” His howl echoed around the arena.

Everyone stared at us.

I gave them a friendly smile. “I’m calling in reinforcements.”

A coyote yipped.

Doss jerked upright. “Who hit me?”

“Get out of here, kid.”

The kid took one look at Doss’s furious face and bolted.

“Who hit me?” Doss demanded in his squeaky voice.

Assuming my best dumb blonde expression, I stared at him blankly. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yeah, you dumb bitch. Did you see who hit me?” Doss bellowed.

“Watch your mouth, Sonny,” an old woman with purple hair yelled.

Doss got to his feet and glared at me. “You hit me, didn’t you?”

“And why would I do that?” How had Doss got hired as a deputy?

He pulled his gun. “Get your hands up and take off the gun belt.”

“Which is it? Get my hands up or take off the gun belt?”

“Get your hands up,” Doss shouted.

The click of a dozen guns being cocked sent a chill down my back. Holy hell! A lot of people were packing.

“Put your gun away, Sonny, or I’m gonna shoot your balls off,” the purple hair granny warned.

One look at the expression on the old woman’s face and I believed her. I raised my hands. Crap! Armed with long rifles, Buffalo Bill, Jolene and eight men were heading our way. Things were about to get ugly.

“I’m charging you with threatening a police officer,” Doss said nervously.

Why did testosterone make men so stupid? “If you’re smart, Deputy Doss, you’ll leave while you still can.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

I rolled my eyes. “You do realize you’re outnumbered.”

“I can handle them. Drop your gun belt, I’m confiscating your weapons,” Doss commanded.

“Arizona is an open carry state. I’m permitted to wear my guns any place I want.”

“Not in my town.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let me guess. You’re related to the Sheriff, aren’t you?”

“So?”

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“It’s not going to save you this time,” I answered.

Granny waved her gun at Doss. “Run, Sonny. I’m giving you a head start before I start shooting.”

Doss finally realized he was about to get shot full of holes and bolted.

The enraged townsfolk chased after him, firing wildly.

The gunfire spooked the livestock.

I watched in horror as Doss opened all the gates on the corrals and shot into the air.

The horses, cattle and bulls stampeded.

The townsfolk ran for their lives.

Huh? Arizona was as wild as the Middle East. Who knew?

The frightened livestock trampled the vendor tents and surged out into the street. Brakes squealed, horns honked, and people climbed onto parked cars as the huge bulls charged down the sidewalk.

I winced as more vendors’ tents were destroyed by the enormous bulls. I had really wanted to do some shopping today.

The thunder of hooves caught my attention. Stone, my squad and other cowboys

raced after the escaping livestock.

Stone reigned in his horse. “You, okay?”

I nodded.

“Stay put.” He galloped off.

Granny let out a sigh. “That is one fine looking man.”

“Yes, he is.”

Doss charged down the bleachers.

“Hey! That skunk is going to get away.”

I smiled grimly. “No, he’s not.” I stepped in front of Doss. “Going somewhere?”

“You think you can stop me?” Doss sneered as he tried to dart around me.

I blocked him. “I do.”

“Stupid bitch!” He swung at me.

I ducked and planted my foot in his groin.

With an agonized squeak, Doss rolled down the bleachers and hit the ground hard.

“You’re such a prick.” I rammed my knee into his face when he tried to get up.

He toppled over.

“Nice moves,” Granny cackled.

I removed Doss’s weapons belt and handcuffed him. “Anyone got some rope. I don’t feel like chasing him.”

“I do, ma’am.” A cute cowboy got off his horse and expertly hogtied Doss. “Your menfolk are heading this way.”

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I looked up. Yep, along with about a dozen patrol cars and a bunch of worn-out livestock. This was going to get interesting.

Chapter Fourteen

Getting out of the van, I watched the molten sun turn the sky a fiery red before it dropped behind a jagged crown of mountains. The silence was broken only by the wind in the trees, and the hoot of an owl. Peace seeped into my bones. It was like I had come home.

Stone gestured at the large, adobe hacienda with pink bougainvillea cascading down the walls. “What do you think?”

“Your house is beautiful.”

His shoulders relaxed. “Could you think of it as home?”

“I’ve never belonged anywhere. Never had a family.” I smiled at him. “This place is like a dream come true.”

Something intense flared in Stone’s eyes. “All of this can be yours, if you marry me.”

“What? Marry?” I felt a curious swooping pull on my heart and I wanted to shout yes, but I wasn’t sure he even liked me. “Are you serious?”

“I am.” Stone smiled. “I knew you were the one when you started throwing your precious food at me.”

“It’s about time you got here,” a tiny Hispanic woman scolded from the doorway.

My squad groaned.

“Say yes,” Tex urged.

Rodriguez interjected, “C’mon Chiquita, you know you belong with us.”

I gaped at them. It was like all of them were proposing.

The Hispanic woman hurried toward us. “Is someone hurt? What did Doss do?”

Hector strode over to her and planted a hot one on her lips. “Hush momma, I told you what happened at the rodeo.”

“They really arrested Doss?”

Stone picked her up, swung her around and kissed her cheeks. “They did, Momma Rosa.”

“And you didn’t hit him?” Momma Rosa asked.

With a huge grin, Stone replied, “No, but Tess did.” He set Momma Rosa on her feet.

“Hey, the ass was trying to get away,” I replied.

Momma Rosa stared at me for a moment, then nodded. “You are just like Alex described you.”

I was?

“You should have been there Momma Rosa. The local television station showed up. They interviewed everyone and took pictures of us herding the livestock back into the arena,” Tex said.

Johnson laughed. “There were over one hundred witnesses, and the Sheriff couldn’t let it slide, this time.”

“What nailed it was Doss didn’t know about the security cameras Buffalo Bill just installed. Once the Sheriff reviewed the tapes, he had to arrest his nephew. You should have seen the expression on Doss’s face when he learned the property damage was over ten thousand dollars. I think he shit himself,” Rodriquez chortled.

I sniffed the air. “Something smells awfully good.”

“I made tamales,” Momma Rosa answered.

“Tamales!” The guys charged into the house.

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Mamma Rose and Hector followed them into the house.

I laughed. “That good, huh?”

“Yes, they are.” Stone held the door open for me. “And call me Alex.”

I stared up at him in surprise. “You sure?”

“I am.” He leaned down and brushed his lips over mine. “I’m keeping you.”

“I have a lot of baggage.”

He kissed me again. “So do I.”

“The food is getting cold,” Hector called.

Alex escorted me to the dining room, and being the perfect gentleman, he pulled out my chair and took the seat next to me. I couldn’t remember the last time I had laughed so much or eaten such wonderful food.

That’s when it hit me. This was my home, and they were the family I always longed for.

“Can you teach me how to make tamales, Momma Rosa?”

“It would be an honor to teach you, Tess.”

Shooting her a nervous smile, I added, “I don’t know how to cook. Anything. Will that be a problem?”

“No, it will not.”

I beamed happily. “Great.”

The phone rang.

Everyone stared at it.

“What’s wrong?”

Alex scowled. “That phone is only used for business.” He got up and answered it. “Stone.”

My stomach knotted when anger clouded Alex’s face. Had Roberts or Pops found us?

“I understand. I appreciate the update.” Alex hung up the phone. “That was General Masters. He wanted to let us know the fiasco at the rodeo made the national news and it shows us rounding up the loose livestock. Masters doesn’t think anyone will recognize us.”

Damn, Pops would. “Did they show me too?”

“No.”

The wall phone in the kitchen started ringing.

“That can’t be good,” Tex muttered.

Alex picked it up. “Hello. What? How did that happen?”

I stiffened when Alex’s gaze fixed on me.

“Thanks for the heads up, deputy.” Alex replaced the receiver.

“What’s wrong Sarge?” Johnson asked.

“Doss escaped custody, didn’t he,” I interjected.

A muscle jerked in Alex’s jaw. “He did.”

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“Or the Sheriff let him loose,” Hector spat.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Instead of heading for the border, that idiot is coming here, isn’t he?”

“Yep.” Alex cracked his knuckles. “And get the beat down he so richly deserves.”

Rodriguez stood up. “I’ll get my gear and do a perimeter check.”

“I’ll go with him,” Johnson said.

The kitchen phone rang again. Alex picked up the receiver. “Stone. Uh huh. Okay. How long? Thanks.” He hung up. “Watch over Hector and Momma Rosa, Tess.”

“Okay. Is Doss close?”

“Yes, he is.” He motioned at Tex. “Get your gear.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alex strapped on his weapons and went out the back door.

I frowned. Doss wore his sidearm gunslinger style. “Can Deputy Doss shoot?”

“Hell no,” Hector replied. “As far as I know, he has never qualified at the range.”

My eyebrows rose in surprise. “How is he still a deputy sheriff?”

“His mother has a lot of money,” Momma Rosa said. “Which she uses to cover-up all of Doss’s mistakes.”

A patrol car with its overhead lights flashing skidded to a stop in the front yard.

I looked out. “Dammit, that jerk ran over your flowers Momma Rosa.”

The sound of a shotgun being racked had me spinning around.

The expression on Momma Rosa’s face didn’t bode well for Doss. She threw open the front door and stormed out.

“Shit!” I ran after her.

Hector was right on my heels. “He ran over her roses?”

“Yep.”

“Dios Mios!”

Boom!

Screaming blue bloody murder, Doss rolled around on the ground, clutching his butt.

“You evil man! You ran over my prized rose bushes,” Momma Rosa hollered.

Hector peered under the patrol car and shook his head sadly. “They will have to be replaced.”

“My babies are dead?”

Hector nodded.

“You shot me over a bunch of stupid roses? I’m going to put you in jail for the next hundred years,” Doss screeched and tried to get up.

Momma Rosa shot him again.

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“Stop it you crazy bitch. I’m a cop!”

“No, you are not.” Momma Rosa reloaded the shotgun.

“Get away from me! I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.”

“I think Doss got the message.” I carefully took the shotgun away from her. “Did you use bird shot, Momma Rosa?”

“No, rock salt. It hurts like hell, and he won’t be able to sit down for a week.”

A giggle escaped me as the squad rushed up. “Momma Rosa has it all under control.”

“Just because I’m old, doesn’t mean I’m helpless.”

Tex grinned. “No, ma’am, helpless you’re not.”

“We will buy more roses tomorrow.” Hector led her into the house.

Two patrol cars pulled up.

“I’ll be right back.” Alex walked over to them.

A short time later, a paramedic unit showed up.

The back of my neck began to itch. Shit! Pops had found me. I pulled my guns and carefully moved across the front yard. He was close. Too damn close.

A sharp pain erupted in my right shoulder. Ouch! I yanked out a tranquilizer dart. Before I could call for help, the world spun around me, and everything went black.

Chapter Fifteen

Water hit me in the face. “Wake up!”

I jerked upright and looked around in confusion. Where was I? What had happened?

“Wake up!” More water was thrown at me. “Did you think I wouldn’t find you?”

My vision cleared and my memory came rushing back. I shot to my feet, only to be jerked back down. I was handcuffed to a kitchen pipe inside the rusty remains of an old travel trailer. “If you have harmed any of them, I will kill you.”

Pops cocked his head to one side and studied me like I was an interesting but odd specimen. “I believe you would try, but that won’t be necessary. I’ve challenged Stone to combat. Winner gets you.”

“No! I’ll never work with you again.”

“Never is a long time,” Pops shot back.

Something beeped. Pops pulled out his satellite phone and smiled. “Your man has come for you. Don’t go anywhere.” He casually strode off.

“Dammit!” I jerked at the cuffs.

Pops called, “Oh, by the way, I removed your lock picks.”

“Fuck!” I reached inside my bra with my right hand. It was gone. I quickly checked

my braid. That pick was gone too. I screamed, “You are a dead man. Do you hear me? A dead man.”

Pops laughed.

I scanned the trailer for any kind of weapon. There weren’t any. The windows were gaping holes and through the broken metal door I could see an old, abandoned gas station with two faded red, vintage gas pumps. I rubbed my aching forehead. Where was I? As hot as it was, I still had to be in Arizona.

A better question was: What drug had Pops used on me? Ugh. My mouth tasted like old socks. Think. Think. I knew my father would set booby traps for Alex and the squad. Pops always played dirty, and he probably thought killing them would break my spirit.

A cry of fury broke from me, and I kicked the shit out of what remained of the kitchen sink. I had to get free and warn them. No one hurt my family. I yanked as hard as I could, and the pipe fractured. Oh, my God! It was working! Rearing back, I slammed both feet into the pipe, again and again. Crack! The metal broke in half. “Ha! You screwed up Pops and it’s time I taught you a lesson.” I slid the cuff off the pipe and stood up. The world spun dizzily around me. “Whoa!” The tranquilizer was still affecting me.

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Very carefully, I walked over to the window and looked out. A shimmering haze of heat hung over saguaro strewn hills. Where had Pops parked? He always carried enough weapons to start a small war. Staggering like a drunk, I went to the opposite window and spotted a brown jeep parked next to some skeletal trees. "Gotcha."

Picking up the broken pipe, I eased the door open and wobbled over to the jeep. Yes, there was a God! Through the dusty back window, I could see a variety of weapons and a case of water. I swung the pipe and broke the window.

The car alarm sounded.

I grabbed an AK-47 and checked it over. It was fully loaded.

"Well done, Tess," Pops yelled.

"You want a fight? Fight me."

Pops laughed. "You can barely stand. It wouldn't be much of a fight,"

A coyote howled.

Utter relief swept over me. Alex and the squad were here. I grabbed a bottle of water and drained it. "Are you afraid of me, old man?"

Pops dragged an unconscious Hispanic man wearing desert camo down the hill. He stopped six feet from me. "Drop your weapon or I'll put a bullet in his head." He jammed the muzzle of his rifle into the man's cheek.

Horror knotted my stomach. That was Rodriquez. Had he hurt anyone else? I dropped my rifle and raised my hands.

“Good girl.” Pops tossed me a handcuff key. “Cuff yourself to him.”

I did and quickly checked to see how badly injured he was.

Rodriquez winked at me.

Holy shit! He had let himself be captured. I bit my lip to keep from grinning. Pops was about to get a much-needed lesson. “Did you find Roberts?”

“Not yet.” Pops handed me a bottle of water. “Drink it. I saw your medical records.”

“Now you’re concerned about my health?”

“I can’t have my best soldier incapacitated.” Pops scanned the hills. “Is your man a coward?”

The desert floor moved and a man in a ghillie suit suddenly rose up. “I could have killed you anytime in the last ten minutes, Reynolds.” Alex’s pistol was pointed at Pops. “But you are Tess’s father.”

It was the first time I had seen my father at a loss for words.

A buzzing noise caught my attention. “Is that a drone?” I pointed.

“You brought a drone?” Pops snapped.

“No, we didn’t and if you didn’t, it belongs to Roberts,” Alex replied.

Johnson and Tex erupted from the desert floor. Both were wearing ghillie suits.

“Someone stole one from the Marine base in Yuma,” Johnson said.

Tex raised his binoculars. “It’s armed.”

“Not for long.” Pops opened the rear of the jeep, took out a case. “Rocket launcher. Don’t get nervous and shoot me.”

The drone was getting a little too close. “How about you blow that thing to kingdom come before it uses us as target practice.”

Pops placed the rocket launcher on his shoulder, sighted in on the drone and fired. The missile streaked away and two seconds later, a fireball erupted.

The men stared at each other, and I could feel the testosterone levels rising. “Here’s a thought. How about we go kill Roberts.”

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“Get in the jeep,” Pops ordered.

Kaboom!The ground shook beneath our feet. A fireball rose high into the air.

I glared at Pops. “You made a goliath bomb, didn’t you?”

“I wanted to see if the Alpha Dogs were as good as everyone claims,” Pops said without an ounce of remorse.

A black helicopter raced across the desert.

I watched it for a moment. The pilot was good. Flying that low was hard. “The hunters aren’t going to be happy you blew Roberts into itty-bitty pieces.”

Without even a goodbye, Pops jumped in the jeep and took off.

“Coward,” I yelled after him.

Alex held out his hand. “Ready to go home?”

“Yes, I am, but first can you uncuff us?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Chapter Sixteen

I sat on the back porch swing and watched the sun come up. For the first time in my

life, I was truly happy. I had a family and a home. What did my future hold? Who knew.

If I married Alex, my father would keep trying to kill him. There was so little left of the body found at the bomb site that the CIA couldn't verify the remains were Roberts'. If he was still alive, Roberts would redouble his efforts to kill us.

"Good morning." Alex leaned down and kissed me.

Wowzers, could that man kiss. I smiled at him. "Good morning."

Alex put a handful of dandelions on the patio table. "I brought you some flowers." He sat next to me and his foot tapped nervously.

"Thank you." Those weren't flowers. They were weeds, but what the hell, it was the thought that counted. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." His foot kept tapping.

I placed my hand on his leg. "You're acting kinda weird and that scares the bejesus out of me. Who's trying to kill us now?"

"The usual suspects." Alex handed me a small box. "I bought this for you."

I shook it. "No one has ever given me a gift before."

"Never? Not even for your birthday or Christmas?"

"Nope. What is it?"

"Your ring."

“My what?” I opened the box. It held a simple gold wedding band. I took it out and read the inscription. Finders Keepers. I bit my lip to keep from laughing. The love of my life was so romantic. “It’s perfect.”

The tension drained from Alex’s body, and he slid it on my ring finger.

“I haven’t said yes, yet.”

Alex’s smile bordered on smug. “You will.”

“What makes you think that?”

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He pulled me onto his lap. “First I’m going to kiss you senseless, then I’m going to put my cock deep inside you and fuck your brains out.”

The tee shirt I was wearing rode up my hips and I could feel the cool morning air on my bare butt. “You do know I haven’t been with a man before?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Alex said arrogantly.

“It doesn’t?”

“Nope, I have a magical cock.”

I smothered a laugh. Was he trying to settle my virginal nerves? Cause it was working. “Magical, huh?”

Alex’s mouth closed over mine, demanding, sensual and full of carnal need.

Boom! It was like a switch got flipped and I was wrapped around him like a deranged nymphomaniac.

Our mouths locked together, Alex scooped me up and marched through the kitchen.

“Do you need a condom?” Momma Rosa asked Alex as he carried me past her.

I held out my hand.

Momma Rosa put a foil pouch in my hand. “I’ll call Pastor Mike.”

I struggled to think through the haze of bliss. Pastor Mike?

Alex walked into his room, kicked the door shut and dropped me on the bed. “Get ready for the ride of your life.”

“Yippee-ki-yay! I get to ride a cowboy!”

Alex hit a button on a tape deck. Bump and grind music filled the room.

To my utter astonishment, he broke into a dance that rivaled the pelvic thrusting Chippendales. He ripped off his shirt and tossed it at me.

Giggling like a loon, I caught it and waved it over my head.

His muscular body moved with the music. A little two-step followed by a twirl and poof; his pants were gone!

My jaw dropped. He was butt naked. He shook his taut ass at me.

I hooted.

Alex spun around and his jutting penis had my full attention. That was not going to fit.

“I’m going to start with eating your sweet little pussy,” Alex rumbled as he crawled up the bed. “And once you start screaming my name, I’ll move onto the good stuff.”

“The good stuff?” I asked faintly.

Alex mouth claimed mine in a long voracious kiss that stole my breath and addled my senses. His big, callused hands slid my tee shirt up and caressed my breasts. An

aching need blossomed inside me.

He sucked my right nipple, and a firestorm of pleasure hit me. “Like that?”

“Yes, very much.”

I was suddenly flat on my back and Alex’s head was between my legs. Pressing his tongue deep into my pussy, he dragged it upward over my clit; again, and again and again.

An insane pressure built in my lady parts, driving me wild. I screamed as a brain-jelling climax hit. I couldn’t move as spasm after spasm shook me.

“Now we move onto the good stuff.”

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I sucked in a shuddering breath. What could be better than that? My internal muscles quivered as his cock pushed against my pussy. I guess I was about to find out.

With one thrust Alex was deep inside me. There was a flash of pain as my body stretched to accommodate him.

“You, okay?”

I kissed his shoulder. “Yeah, but I’m waiting for the good stuff to begin.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alex pulled his cock out. “Get ready for the ride of your life.” Gripping my ass, he pounded into me with a rhythm that stole all reason.

I arched against Alex and met him kiss for kiss. Caress for caress. My body clenched on his cock and wave after wave of ecstasy rolled over me, leaving me trembling helplessly.

Alex howled his release, and something hot flooded my cervix.

“Oh hell, we forgot the condom,” I moaned.

“That’s okay, I’ve always wanted a bunch of kids.”

I frowned. “How many kids?”

“At least six.”

“Seriously? So do I.”

“Good.” Alex nibbled on the side of my neck. “Masters gave us four weeks of leave time. Where do you want to go for our honeymoon?”

I gave him the stink eye. “Alaska, but we’re not married yet.”

“We will be in,” Alex looked at his watch. “Two hours.”

“We don’t have a marriage license,” I pointed out.

Alex kissed the tip of my nose. “Yes, we do.”

“I don’t have a dress.”

“Momma Rosa would be honored if you wore her wedding dress.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. “I would love to wear her dress.”

“Why Alaska?”

My eyebrows rose. “I’ve never seen snow, or a glacier or the northern lights.”

“I’ll get us a cabin and we’ll make like tourists.” Alex looked me straight in the eye. “Our life is never going to be boring.”

“Not with six kids or Pops hanging around.”

Alex wrapped his arms around me. “You are the love of my life. Are you ready to do this?”

“I am.”

NOT THE END, BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE STONE LEGACY!