



First Contact

Author: *Theresa Beachman*

Category: Romance, Adult, Thriller

Description: She's MI6. He's ex-Special Forces. A terrorist threat throws them together. But the spark between them? That's the real danger.

Katerina Landon doesn't back down from a fight. When armed mercenaries seize a finance tower and a high-level surveillance system on Christmas Eve, she's thrown into a hostage negotiation that could unravel global security. Her backup? A battle-scarred operative who clearly thinks she doesn't belong in the field.

Leo Bychkov doesn't do politics or diplomats—and he sure as hell doesn't do partners. But Kat is no pencil-pusher. Cool under fire, sharp as a blade, and calm when things go sideways, she's everything Leo didn't expect... and the one thing he can't afford to want.

Their mission—neutralize the threat, extract the hostages, and keep Nightwatchman from falling into the wrong hands. But as bullets fly and secrets unravel, Leo and Kat find themselves locked in a far more dangerous game—one that will follow them long after the mission ends.

This is how it starts. The mission. The spark. The choice.

And it all leads to The Gentleman.

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1

Oslo, Norway.

Ten years ago.

Christmas Eve.

The helicopter's rotors thundered through the crisp winter afternoon as it descended toward the financial quarter. Leonid Bychkov leaned forward, running his thumb over a worn brass compass, watching the angular skyline grow sharper through the frost-rimmed window. The buildings glittered in the cold light, modern monoliths of glass and steel. Among them stood their target—the regional headquarters of Hudson Finance, a UK finance and technology giant. A company with a problem.

Leo shifted his gaze to his teammates clad in tactical black, weapons secured but ready. Their reflections ghosted across the glass as the helicopter banked.

Problem solvers.

The chopper's skids kissed the rooftop helipad with a jolt. Snow swirled in violent eddies, whipped into miniature storms by the downwash. As the rotors slowed, James Rook, their leader, signaled the team to disembark. Leo pocketed his compass and followed, ducking low under the blades as the subzero wind lashed at his face.

The scent of cinnamon apples and roasting chestnuts drifted up from the festive market below, clashing with the tension low in his gut. Just a block away, crowds

wandered through the Christmas wonderland, oblivious to the unfolding crisis inside Hudson's monolith.

Leo's boots struck the concrete hard, the rat-a-tat echoing off the rooftop. He fell into step behind Rook as they made for the service stairs. Their descent was swift, boots pounding against the metal treads, breath visible in bursts of white in the unheated space. The air was damp and smelled faintly of disinfectant.

They emerged into a lobby, worlds apart from the indifferent stairwell. Holiday cheer was splashed across every available surface. A towering Christmas tree, decked in gold ornaments and blinking lights, overshadowed the reception desk. Red and green tinsel snaked along the walls, and a garish inflatable Santa grinned from a corner. Someone had gone all-in on the festivities.

Leo let it all slide off him. If he had the time, he might visit his brothers over the holiday. But Christmas wasn't his season. He preferred to hunker down and wait for the whole charade to pass. His teeth clenched in a dull grind. Christmas brought memories and not the good kind.

Rook's hand on his shoulder pulled him back to the present. "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good fight."

"Another day with extra decorations," Leo muttered.

"On the plus side, tinsel makes good trip wire." Rook's gray eyes flickered with somber amusement.

While the rest of the team fanned out across the lobby, taking up strategic positions, he and Rook moved toward the meeting room.

Inside, two men in tailored suits waited. One, tall, with fair hair and glasses, the other

heavysset, his thick neck straining against his collar. Corporate types. Clean-cut, polished, and clearly rattled. The thickset one adjusted his tie with nervous fingers, while the other tapped a pen against the table, the rhythmic click betraying his unease.

Leo exchanged glances with Rook. Time to solve a problem.

The men looked up as he and Rook pushed into the room.

“Alex Lund?” Rook asked.

The fair-haired man extended a bony hand. “Yes. Crisis management, Hudson Finance.”

Rook gave a sharp nod as he shook Lund’s hand. “James Rook. And this is my second, Leo Bychkov.”

Lund gestured to the thick-set man. “Joseph Tucker. CEO of Hudson Finance.”

Rook hooked one thumb in his belt and stalked to the window. Beyond the plaza, a second building loomed. He unwrapped a piece of gum, popped it in his mouth, and inclined his head at Lund. “We read the brief on the way over.”

“Excellent. We’re keen to avoid publicity and keep the situation contained.” Lund’s pen clicking stilled. “We own this building and the one adjacent.” He gestured toward the window where Rook stood. “As you know, armed men seized control and took hostages this afternoon during a high-stakes data migration. The hostages include some of our senior executives. They have access to sensitive corporate data tied to major UK government contracts.”

Rook grimaced. “You must have excellent security protocols.”

Lund took the hit and kept going. “We were contacted by Cameron Burke, their leader. He’s a known contractor with ties to numerous terrorist groups. Naturally, we are concerned about the hostages but?—”

“Burke’s team has breached Hudson’s encrypted servers,” Tucker blurted. “They’ve accessed Nightwatchman.”

Leo frowned. “Nightwatchman?”

“Highly classified.” Tucker planted both hands on the table, leaning forward. “It’s a covert surveillance system that monitors global financial transactions for counterterrorism purposes. If released, it wouldn’t just expose UK operations—it would compromise allied intelligence networks, defense partnerships, everything.” His knuckles whitened against the dark wood. “The Norwegians are letting us handle this quietly, but one wrong move...”

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“Quietly?” Rook snorted. “That’s one word for it.”

Leo absorbed the implications, his mind already racing through scenarios. A system like that in the wrong hands...Christ.

“Burke wants proof of Whitehall’s commitment before he’ll discuss terms. He’s demanding a face-to-face with a British government representative.”

“We don’t work with others.” Leo kept his tone even.

Rook held up a hand, amusement playing along the lines of his mouth despite the tension. “We will, but it’ll cost extra.” His jaw worked as he added, “Consider it our playing nice with others’ fee.”

“Our primary concern is containment.” Tucker’s voice steadied, but the pulse jumping in his throat betrayed him. “This cannot leave this room.”

A phone’s shrill ring screeched.

Tucker snatched it up, his shoulders rigid as he listened. He put the phone down. “The British government representative is here. She’s on her way up?—”

“She?” The word hit Leo like a bucket of freezing water. “You’re sending in a woman?”

“Yes. Agent Landon from MI6?—”

“No.” Leo shook his head as he folded his arms across his chest. “Absolutely not. We’re not putting a woman at risk.”

“Agent Landon is highly qualified?—”

“Did I stutter?” Ice edged Leo’s words.

Rook’s grip clamped onto his elbow, yanking him away from the others. “Leo.” His voice dropped low. “I know where this is coming from. But we’re here now, and this is happening.”

Leo hissed a curse through clenched teeth.

“You good?” Rook’s grip hardened.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Rook squeezed his shoulder once before turning back to the room. “Just a misunderstanding. We’re green.”

Leo exhaled. His past pressed against his skull like a vise. Fuck. The office door swung open and despite years of training, his blood pressure spiked.

He forced a slow breath as she entered.

The tactical gear couldn’t disguise her athletic frame or the precision of her movements. Dark russet hair secured in a practical ponytail, but it was her eyes that stopped him—gray-blue and arresting. The kind that catalogued everything and gave nothing away.

Those eyes met his, held him for a beat longer than necessary, before she gave him a

curt nod. All business. No hint of uncertainty or hesitation. It should have reassured him. Instead, his gut twisted tighter. Professional or not, they were about to send a woman into the fire.

Lund stepped forward. “Katerina Landon. Welcome. I’m Alex Lund. Thank you for coming at such short notice.”

Her half-smile held no warmth. “Just Kat is fine, and I’m not sure I was given much choice.”

“Yes, well...” Lund moved on. “This is Joseph Tucker, our CEO. And these gentlemen are James Rook and Leo Bychkov.”

She eyed Rook and Leo, her blue-gray gaze clinical. “Mercs?”

“Specialized consultants in crisis management. Less paperwork that way.” Rook flashed her his winning smile that sent an inexplicable spear of jealousy into Leo’s gut.

“You’ve been briefed?” Leo asked, noting how she shifted her weight—the subtle readiness. She shook his hand, her grip firm. No waver. This was a woman who could look after herself.

“On the way here,” she confirmed.

“So you are aware?” Lund arched one straggly brow. “Your role is to convince Burke that His Majesty’s government will negotiate. Buy us time to get the extraction team in place, secure the hostages and the Nightwatchman.”

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“This isn’t my specialty—” For the first time, uncertainty threaded through her voice.

“Needs must.” Lund’s fingers formed a steeple on the table, the fluorescent light deepening the lines around his mouth into something harder. “But you’re what we have. That’s why Rook and his team will be your backup. You’ll keep Burke talking until the extraction team secures the Nightwatchman.”

She processed his words with barely a flicker—just a tightening around her eyes that Leo knew too well. That moment of clarity when someone sees past the corporate speak and mission parameters. When they understand what really mattered to men like Lund.

The money.

Not the hostages.

And they would feed her to the wolves to protect it.

2

MI6 agent Katrina Landon hadn’t known what to expect when she’d been thrown into this mission. But it certainly wasn’t the two mercenaries dominating the room now that Lund and Tucker had left.

This wasn’t how she’d planned to spend Christmas Eve. She should have been at the Julemarked right now, sipping mulled wine and eating hot waffles with vanilla ice cream, before catching her flight home to London from her Oslo secondment. Not

that home offered much comfort—just a neglected money plant and a stack of unopened mail that seemed to multiply every time she returned from an operation.

Like everything else in her life, her Christmas plans had crumbled under the weight of duty. Five years in MI6 had taught her that relationships—romantic or otherwise—were luxuries she couldn't afford. Every date was an exercise in partial truths, each potential partner a security risk requiring endless paperwork and vetting. Her last attempt at connection had ended mid-dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant when duty called. She'd left him sitting there, her half-eaten spaghetti growing cold. She hadn't bothered to reschedule. It was easier that way.

She was adept at keeping her face neutral, but these men intrigued her as they ran through the mission parameters once last time. Rook had the solid build of someone who could handle himself in a fight, his black tactical gear doing nothing to hide it. Mismatched gray eyes met hers with a glint of silver and unmistakable cockiness.

But it was his partner that drew her eye. Military background radiated from his bearing, from the way he positioned himself in the room. His arms were locked across his broad chest, and though his body armor was practical, it couldn't conceal the coiled strength beneath.

A scar traversed his rugged face but it didn't detract from his attractiveness. His eyes drew her in. Ocean-green beneath dark lashes, watchful and intense. And right now, they were fixed on her.

She'd read his military file, except for the sealed parts she'd been unable to access. Classified. Leo Bychkov was a man with secrets.

A knot tightened in her gut. She was no rookie, but this operation was a step into the unknown—especially working with private contractors instead of her usual police and military backup. Paid mercenaries operated outside the rules of her training.

Once inside, she would meet with the hostage takers for an alleged negotiation while Leo and his team moved in parallel, slipping into position to neutralize the terrorists, extract the hostages and secure the Nightwatchman.

Timing was everything.

Bychkov moved closer. Despite being such a big man, he moved with fluid grace. He pitched his voice quiet enough that Rook couldn't hear. "Scared?"

She met his gaze, and the raw honesty in his face, at odds with his dangerous demeanor, locked the words on her tongue.

"Good. You'd be an idiot not to be." His hand found her shoulder, the contact sending an inappropriate spark of awareness through her.

"I've extracted hostages from places where things went sideways fast." He held her gaze, and she fought the urge to track the scar that marred his otherwise handsome features. "The plan isn't the key. It's keeping your head when the plan falls apart."

His study of her made her pulse quicken, but whether from nerves or attraction, she wasn't sure she wanted to know. "And when it falls apart?"

"You trust your training. And you trust us." He tapped his chest, drawing her attention again to his solid frame. "My team deals with the obstacles. Your job is to keep them talking, keep them focused on you. We'll handle the rest."

"If you two are done with the pep talk?" Rook materialized beside them, his silver eyes glinting in the low light. "Team's ready to move. Unless you'd prefer to hold hands and sing Kumbaya first?"

Leo shot him a look and retreated, putting deliberate distance between himself and

Kat. Something in her chest constricted at the loss of his proximity.

Rook grinned, unperturbed. “Bychkov. Status?”

“Comms check complete,” Leo confirmed, his voice gruff. “Waiting on your go.”

“Copy that.” Rook’s metallic gaze settled on Kat. “Try not to get shot, Agent Landon. Paperwork’s a bitch when we lose an MI6 officer.”

She lifted her chin. She’d learned long ago that showing any hint of doubt only invited more scrutiny. “I’ll do my best not to inconvenience you.”

Rook beamed, all teeth and danger. “Well then. You might survive after all.”

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Leo checked his watch, the tension making his shoulders rise. “Rook.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rook tapped his earpiece, his expression transforming from sardonic to lethal. “Show time, ladies and gentlemen.”

3

The rest of his team melted into the night through the tower block’s basement rear door. Wreaths of smoke in the wind.

Leo cupped Kat’s elbow. “Stay close.” Touching her sparked something in him he couldn’t afford to analyze right now. Above them, the Hudson building knifed into the dark sky. Five ground exits. Six elevators. Two stairwells. A logistical nightmare for most, but his team had it covered. His stomach cramped at the thought of what awaited them inside.

They moved as shadows across the plaza, her steps matching his with precision. He tracked her movements even as he surveyed their surroundings—a habit he couldn’t shake, no matter how capable the woman beside him proved to be. And he didn’t doubt Kat Landon was more than capable. The steel in her spine suggested someone who’d earned her position the hard way.

“You don’t strike me as the typical guns-for-hire type.” Her voice was a scant whisper.

Leo scanned upward, checking the dark windows above them. His mind catalogued possible sniper positions, angles of fire—anything that might threaten his team.

Threaten her. “That’s because I’m not. Let’s just say certain people in your organization understand that sometimes you need alternative solutions.” Because sometimes rules and red tape strangle the right thing. He slowed as they approached the main doors, hyperaware of her presence beside him. “Does it bother you?”

“No. Actually, it makes a change, knowing there are still people willing to do what’s necessary. Damn the consequences.”

He looked at her then, understanding crackling between them. Maybe she knew the weight of impossible choices and understood that sometimes protection meant getting your hands dirty. It made his usual instinct to shield her feel less like condescension and more like partnership.

Comms hissed. “Five minutes to breach,” Rook said. “If you two are done with the deep and meaningful, the clock’s ticking and I’m getting older by the second here.”

The building towered before them, its glass façade reflecting nothing but shadows. Two armed men emerged from the revolving doors, their weapons ready, faces obscured. Leo’s breathing slowed, instinct warring within him, wanting to step between Kat and the men. But that would defeat the entire purpose.

This was her show now.

“Remember,” he murmured, barely moving his lips. “We’ll be right behind you. Five minutes after you clear the lobby.” His hand twitched at his side, wanting to reach for her hand to give it a reassuring squeeze, but knowing he couldn’t show any sign that she was anything but expendable to him.

The taller guard barked at them. “Landon. Hands where we can see them.”

Leo forced himself to step back, to let her walk forward alone. He’d worked dozens

of operations like this, watched good people walk into the lion's den, but something about watching her take measured steps toward those men made his throat close up.

Fuck Bychkov. She's trained for this. Your job is to get her out, not lose your head before it even starts.

"In position," Rook's voice murmured in his ear. "All teams green."

Leo retreated, his eyes never leaving Kat's back as the guards patted her down. Every second felt like an eternity, but he kept his breathing steady, kept his trigger finger relaxed. Five minutes.

He could do anything for five minutes.

The guards flanked her, then led her through the glass doors. Light glinted off her auburn hair one last time before she disappeared into the building's maw.

And then she was gone.

4

Kat pushed through the door, leaving Leo behind. When she glanced back, he was gone—swallowed by shadows as if he'd never existed. But fifteen years of fieldwork had taught her better.

He was there, watching.

The doors swung shut with a soft hiss, sealing her in the lobby with the two armed men. Her training clicked into place—not the polished MI6 protocols, but the instincts honed during her five years as a Weapons Engineering Officer in the Royal Navy that had taught her to think clearly under pressure.

Dim emergency lights cast long shadows across the marble floor, gleaming off patches where tracked-in snow had melted. Professional calm settled over her.

Breathe, girl.

“You’re doing great.” Leo’s voice on her ear comms sank into her, the connection with him slowing her erratic heartbeat.

“Show me your hands.” The taller guard’s weapon followed her movements with military precision. These men were not thugs.

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Kat raised her palms, keeping her voice calm. “I’m unarmed.”

The second man approached, his pat-down quick but thorough. She fixed her gaze on the ceiling, forcing her muscles to stay relaxed. Every passing second was intel—their movements, their equipment. All pieces of the puzzle.

“Clear.” A gun jabbed in her back. “Upstairs. Now.”

“Okay. Okay.” She climbed the stairs to the sixth floor, the gun’s pressure steering her movements.

At the landing, another prod. “Through that door.”

She stepped onto the sixth floor of Hudson Financial. The lobby was deserted, Christmas decorations creating a surreal backdrop. Her mouth tasted bitter. She’d never look at tinsel the same way again—assuming she lived that long.

“Over there.” A shove directed her toward the glass doors. Beyond them lay an open-plan office. Circles of blond wood desks and silent computer stations, their screens still glowing with abandoned work.

The blinds were drawn tight, preventing any surveillance drones from peeking in. A woman’s quiet sobbing drew her attention. In the far corner, a group of staff huddled on the floor, hands bound with plastic ties. Kat counted heads, her teeth pressed hard together. Six civilians. Six complications.

She let her gaze slide over their captor’s weapons. Standard-issue Glockes. Modified

SIG Sauers. The casual way they handled the guns suggested military, even though their stance reeked of private sector arrogance.

Two masked men towered over the restrained employees, several of whom were quietly weeping. A third stalked toward her, the ledge of his forehead protruding above deep-set eyes. Burke.

She held out her hand. “Kat Landon.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Burke’s breath reeked of cigars as he invaded her space.

“MI6.”

A derisive laugh echoed from one man guarding the hostages. “They sent a fucking woman?”

“I can show—” She reached for her vest.

“Whoa.” Cold metal pressed against her wrist from the nearest guard. “Nice and easy now, love.”

She withdrew her ID with deliberate slowness, never breaking eye contact with Burke.

He studied her credentials, then sniffed loudly. “She’s kosher.”

She lowered her gaze. The hostages’ zip ties were standard police issue—breakable at the catch point.

Rough fingers grazed her ear, yanking out her earpiece. Burke crushed it under his boot with unnecessary force. “Won’t be needing that, sweetheart.”

Kat let her gaze graze the floor. She'd show them soon enough what she was made of.

Burke crowded her, his wet wool and tobacco stench choking her. His breath was hot against her face. "You're here to bid on behalf of the UK government?"

"I'm here to negotiate." Kat kept her voice steady despite the gun digging into her sternum. "The British government wants to ensure the Nightwatchman stays secure. We can prevent unnecessary bloodshed."

Burke's lip curled. "Five hundred million sterling. Non-negotiable."

She scratched her ear. Without Leo's voice, the room felt more claustrophobic. Sealed off from the world.

"Movement." The guard at the window shifted, gun barrel pushing back the blinds. "Three o'clock."

Burke's weapon snapped up, pressing hard under her jaw. The metal was cold, but his voice was colder. "If this is one of your MI6 games?—"

"There's no game." She tried to swallow against the pressure. Leo wouldn't risk a tactical error, not with hostages. Something else was happening. "I came alone. Just like you asked."

The muzzle dug deeper. "For your sake, you better be right."

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The air inside the basement was freezing, carrying the gritty bite of concrete and mildew. It clung to Leo's skin beneath his gear, damp and unrelenting. His gloved hand brushed the rough wall as he inched forward, each step deliberate. The window he'd slipped through had been a godsend—barely wide enough for his gear-laden torso, and certainly not in the building's schematics. A lucky break. He wasn't about to waste it.

“Ground floor entrance secure.” Rook's voice was measured on the comms.

“Copy.” Leo nodded, sweeping his gaze across the room. Dim light trickled in from a single bulb, flickering faintly like a failing heartbeat. The space was a graveyard of abandoned office equipment. Rusted shelving units, broken chairs, obsolete printers and computers were shoved against the walls in haphazard piles. Shadows spilled into every corner, thick and impenetrable. “Approaching rear access stairs.”

All far too quiet. Nothing from Kat.

His throat tightened. Someone had cut her comms, leaving her blind—and his team at a disadvantage.

A short burst of static filled his ears, followed by Rook's clipped voice. “Movement on the west perimeter. Police van changing position. What the fuck?”

Leo froze.

Rook swore again. “I gave explicit orders: nothing moves, nothing changes.” The words came out as barely more than a breath, but the fury behind them was

unmistakable.

They'd locked down every detail. And now? Leo's mind flashed to Kat, somewhere in the building, blind.

"Lund, what's happening? Who gave that order?" The silence stretched. One heartbeat. Two. Leo's pulse kicked up.

"Eyes on the west side through the drone feed." Rook's voice crackled from floors above. "Shut that shit down right now. I repeat, shut it down."

Leo took the stairs two at a time. What the fuck?

"Copy that," Lund's response finally crawled back.

Fucking moron.

"Drone's giving us a bird's-eye view." Rook's voice spat sparks across the comms. "Tangos have a hostage up against the window. They fucking saw that van."

A gunshot ruptured the air—sharp, unmistakable—reverberating from somewhere high in the building.

"Fuck." Rook's voice came again, vibrating with urgency. "Leo, hostage down. Tangos advancing."

Hostage down.

Leo's blood ran ice-cold. His mind locked onto one name. Kat.

He forced his voice steady, though his lungs were seized. "Copy that. Confirm the

hostage. Man or woman?”

His heartbeat thudded like a war drum.

“Leo, shift position. Link up to my six,” Rook barked. “Tangos closing fast—engage?—”

Static cut off the comms.

Leo bit back a curse, flicking the safety off his weapon as he barreled upward. Their plan was unraveling by the second, but one thing burned clear in his mind.

He had to get to the hostages. And Kat—now.

6

Kat bit down on her tongue so she wouldn’t scream.

Burke had shot a male hostage with no hesitation, holding him against the window as a signal—or a warning—for all to see. The man slid to the floor, leaving blood smeared on the glass. Behind her, panic surged through the remaining hostages, a mixture of muffled screams and shocked inhalations.

She squeezed her eyes tight, wanting to wipe the image from her eyes. Burke had no moral compass. Negotiations with a man like him would be worthless?—

A muted thump.

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She opened her eyes. Thick, acrid smoke billowed from the far corner of the room, filling the space in seconds. Her vision failed as the air grew dense, choking.

“Breach!”

The shout came from somewhere on the edge of her hearing, followed by a deafening explosion. Wood splintered, fragments raining down. The room erupted in a blinding flash, followed by a concussive blast that rattled her teeth and knocked her to the floor.

What the hell?—

She coughed, eyes streaming. The hostages. She had to get to the hostages. Pulling her collar up to cover her mouth and nose, she crawled forward, the floor cold beneath her hands. Voices shouted over the ringing in her ears, commands lost in the chaos.

Gunfire erupted, a rapid, violent staccato that echoed off the walls. She flattened herself against the floor, hands clamped over her ears as bullets ricocheted, sparking off concrete and steel. A heavy thud. Someone—friend or foe, she didn’t know—crashed to the ground nearby.

If I stay here, I’m gonna die.

She pushed up onto her elbows, dragging herself forward inch by inch, her head low. Keep moving. The air was thick, every breath a struggle.

Her hands bumped into something. Feet.

She reached up blindly, grabbing hold. Hands grasped hers in return, trembling but firm. A woman's face emerged from the haze—tear-streaked, eyes bulging with fear.

“It's okay, I've got you,” Kat whispered, pulling the woman close. They huddled together, lying the floor, as the firefight raged around them.

Another burst of gunfire. Too close. Kat's heartbeat was at breaking point. She needed to move, to get them all out before the situation spiraled further.

“Stay down,” she told the woman, squeezing her arm for reassurance. Think. Find a way out.

“Kat. You okay?” A muscular hand gripped her arm. She wiped tears from her blurry eyes.

Leo Bychkov. Tactical goggles perched on his forehead, his face blackened with camo paint. He looked like an avenging angel sent from the depths of hell. His massive frame blocked out what little light filtered through the smoke, a shield between her and Burke's madmen.

“How the hell did?—”

“Talk later.” Leo dropped to one knee beside her, his blade flashing as he sliced through the restraints binding the other woman's wrists. Despite the extreme situation, his actions were controlled—an efficiency that came from years of combat experience. Without a word, he hauled both Kat and the woman to their feet, his muscled arm steady around them. He scanned the room, searching for threats, his body positioned to shelter them both. “I need you to stay close.” His voice was calm, but urgent.

The woman clung to Kat, her trembling transmitted through their joined hands. “I need to go. I need to go.” She suddenly released Kat.

“What? No—” Kat spun, reached for her. Too slow.

Leo was faster. He moved like a striking cobra, six feet of lethal muscle. He caught the woman before she’d taken half a step, slamming her against his side, his arm around her waist. “You stay with me.”

He turned to Kat, his grip on the woman secure. “Come on. We’re getting out of here.”

The room was bedlam—shouts, gunfire, the deafening percussion of boots pounding across shattered glass. But Leo moved like a force of nature beside her, issuing calm, clipped orders as if they weren’t in the middle of a war zone.

“Get them moving. Stairwell’s straight ahead,” he yelled, pointing to the far corner of the room.

Kat nodded, her voice hoarse. “Come on! This way!” She tugged at a trembling woman, guiding her forward, while Leo pulled two more hostages upright, steering them in the same direction.

Gunfire exploded overhead, a harsh, metallic rattle that made Kat flinch instinctively. Leo barely reacted. “Keep low. Stay with them.”

They were halfway to the stairwell, the hostages in a group ahead, when a shadow moved in the smoke—a terrorist, rifle raised.

Leo slammed into Kat, driving her to the floor. The air rushed from her lungs as her back hit the freezing tile, Leo’s solid frame pinning her down.

A crack of gunfire erupted over her head, splintering the wall and sending concrete shards raining down.

Leo's arm jerked as he returned fire. The sharp retort of his weapon echoed. Then a moment of silence.

For a heartbeat, all she could hear was the frantic rattle of her pulse in her ears, and his ragged breathing.

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She twisted and found herself nose to nose with him, his breath fanning warm against her cheek. His eyes locked on hers, dark and intent, and she felt the weight of him in every sense. Not just his body shielding hers, but the fierce protectiveness in his gaze.

The moment broke as he shifted, his voice a low rumble that sensitized her skin. “Stay close. Keep moving.”

He scooped her up like she weighed nothing, hooking his arm around her waist, propelling her back to her feet in one smooth motion.

“Hurry!” he growled, pressing her forward with a hand between her shoulders.

Her attention snapped back to the hostages. They were huddled near the stairwell, their faces pale and bodies trembling with barely contained panic. “Go. Now!” she shouted, waving them on. For one endless second, no one moved. Then the spell broke, and they surged forward as one, stumbling and shoving through the door in their desperation to escape.

Leo stayed behind, laying down cover fire as she herded the hostages down the first flight. The door slammed shut above them as Leo followed, taking the stairs three at a time to catch up.

He grabbed Kat’s arm. “Change of plans. Stairwell’s compromised. They’re coming up from the third floor. There’s a window washer platform, east side. Two rooms over.”

The hostages’ eyes widened in panic. “The maintenance walkway won’t hold?—”

“It will.” He jerked his chin toward a door on their right. “Through there. Fast and quiet.” He pressed a stocky handgun into her palm. Kat hesitated—she’d only met this man hours ago—but something about him made her believe in him.

“You trust me?” His eyes met hers, clear and unwavering, displaying raw determination.

“Yes.” The word came easier than it should have.

His approval warmed his expression for just a moment. “Take point. I’ll cover our six.”

She nodded, mouth sour with fear, and hurried to guide the group forward.

A burst of gunfire erupted behind them. Leo returned fire. “Hurry,” he urged. “We’ve got maybe two minutes before they reach this floor.”

Kat pushed through the door. Empty office space, floor-to-ceiling windows ahead. As he’d promised, the platform hung just outside, swaying slightly in the wind. Her stomach clenched.

This was madness.

7

Leo shouldered past her, his carbine still trained on the door. Time was bleeding away. He pulled the glass breaker from his tactical vest.

The glass breaker struck true, fracturing the safety glass in a controlled spider web. His hands were steady even as his stomach churned. He delivered two more precision strikes. Not fast enough.

With a growl, he raised his gun and drove the buttstock through the remaining glass. It shattered in heavy chunks. Winter wind whipped in, carrying the distant wail of sirens.

The platform swayed as he swung out, testing its stability. His stomach lurched—not from the height, but from the seconds ticking away. Metal creaked beneath his weight as he did quick mental math. Eight people. The platform was rated for maintenance crews, but this was pushing it.

“It’ll hold. Two at a time.” He reached back through the broken window, forcing his expression to stone despite the urgency clawing at his chest. “Women first.”

One of the male hostages lunged forward, shoving past a woman. Leo pistoned an arm, catching him hard across the chest. Hot rage flared through him. We don’t have time for this shit. “Back. Off.” He kept his voice level, though his pulse clamored in his ears. “Women and injured first. You want to play hero, you can help me cover our exit.”

The man stumbled back, face flushing.

The nearest woman balked, staring down at the swinging edge. Panic flared in her eyes—panic that would cost them seconds they couldn’t spare. Leo gentled his voice with effort. “Look at me, not down. I won’t let you fall.” He gripped her arm, guiding her firmly onto the platform, ignoring the slice of arctic wind numbing every inch of exposed skin.

A second woman followed, tears freezing on her cheeks. Too slow.

Gunfire erupted from the hallway. Kat ran to the door and returned fire as Leo got the woman positioned. The platform groaned under the growing weight. Jesus. If the cables failed, if Burke’s men reached this floor before they cleared it—this would be

the shortest rescue op of his career.

He killed the thought and helped another shaking woman through. “Keep low, against the rail.” Five stories up. Exposed on all sides. A fucking nightmare, but his only shot at getting everyone out alive.

The male hostage who’d tried to push through shifted restlessly from foot to foot. “They’ll be here any second?—”

“Then make yourself useful,” Leo snapped, shoving his second backup sidearm into the man’s trembling hands. “Watch that door with Agent Landon.”

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More gunfire erupted from the hallway. Kat took a knee at the stairwell entrance as Leo manhandled the last woman and second man onto the platform.

“Kat. Now!”

She backed toward the window, still firing. Her heel hit empty air and Leo’s heart stopped. He grabbed her waist, yanking her onto the platform. She stumbled against his chest as the entire structure shuddered. The last man scrambled through behind her like his ass was on fire.

Shit.

“Hold on.” Leo hit the control panel, sending up a silent prayer to whatever deity handled overloaded window-washing platforms. The rig jerked, then began its descent with all the speed of an arthritic turtle.

A shadow appeared at the broken window above. Leo shoved Kat behind him. His weapon came up, muscle memory taking over as he took aim. The wind sucked away the gun rapport, but the figure slumped. Another problem down.

The hostages huddled against the railings, eyes squeezed shut.

Leo’s jaw clenched. “Rook, we need cover fire on the east side. Now!”

The platform lurched downward as gunfire erupted from a nearby balcony—the rest of his team providing cover. Thank Christ for small mercies. Leo kept his weapon trained upward, using his body as a shield. He counted each floor of exposed

vulnerability as they inched toward the safety of the ground.

“Almost there.” His back itched with the certainty of crosshairs finding them as he willed the platform to go faster.

Come on.

A burst of gunfire pinged off the platform’s metal frame. Leo’s heart almost punched through his ribs. Fuck.

“Contact, north-east corner!” Rook’s voice crackled through his comms. “Two tangos, eighth floor!”

Leo kept his weapon trained upward, hyperaware of the hostages’ whimpered gasps, of Kat crouched against his back. Every breath she took pressed against him, a rhythm that somehow kept him steady in a world gone mad.

Third floor. The platform bucked, then dropped a sickening foot before catching. Someone screamed. Leo’s stomach vaulted into his throat, but his surveillance of the building above them didn’t waver.

Second floor. His muscles burned from maintaining his protective stance, but he’d die before he moved. The weight of responsibility pressed heavier than any physical pain.

“Rook, status on that cover fire?” Another explosion of gunfire swallowed his words—this time from street level.

“We’re having a grand time down here,” Rook’s sardonic drawl crackled through comms. “You’re more than welcome to join us whenever you feel like coming down the stairs like a normal person.”

The platform shuddered as it passed the first floor, then finally—fucking finally—touched down with a bone-jarring clang.

“Go, go, go!” He shoved the hostages toward his waiting team members, scanning for threats as they stumbled to safety. “Kat, move!”

She hesitated, weapon still directed toward the building. Any other time, he’d admire that unflinching focus. Now, it just made him want to throw her over his shoulder.

Comms crackled. “Nightwatchman secured. All tangos gift-wrapped and tagged,” Rook reported, his voice carrying an edge of grim satisfaction. “Repeat. All tangos down.”

“Acknowledged.” Leo’s eyes swept the windows above one last time. Experience had taught him that over was a dangerous word. Kat’s knuckles were white around her weapon. “Kat. We’re clear.” He held out his hand, trying to ignore how natural the gesture felt.

“Seriously?” She stood up, her skin blanched, her lips touched with blue from the cold. The adrenaline crash was hitting her hard, but her eyes still held the steel he’d noted when he first laid eyes on her.

The urge to pull her into his arms and warm her lips with his surged through him. To forget, just for a moment, all the reasons he couldn’t.

Instead, he helped her off the platform as fresh snow swirled down from the night sky. The moment her boots hit solid ground, he released her hand, ignoring the way he wanted to hold on.

Men like him, men with blood-soaked pasts, didn’t get happy endings.

“Thank you.” She handed him back his gun, her fingers brushing his.

He holstered the weapon, trying to ignore the lingering warmth of her touch.

“Anytime.”

The words slipped out before he could stop them. “Perhaps we could meet again, once all this settles.”

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She looked him straight in the eye. “I don’t do relationships.”

“Me neither.” His reply was automatic. Honest.

She chewed her lower lip, looking up at him through dark lashes. “I’m not good with people.”

He nodded. He got that.

Her smile, when it came, transformed her face. “My friends call me Kat.” Her tongue darted across her top lip, a gesture that shot straight through him. “But you? Leo or Leonid?”

The question landed like a physical blow. “You read my file?”

“Not the redacted parts.” A tiny shrug that was pure challenge. “But the rest, yes. I like to be prepared.”

“Leo.”

“Shame. I prefer Leonid.”

Hot fuck. The way her English accent rolled around his full name sent heat down his spine.

She lifted her hands to the sky, palms up to catch the falling snow. Pure delight softened her expression and as snowflakes melted on her upturned face, he glimpsed

who she might be away from all of this. Someone who could still find magic in winter nights. The revelation twisted deep in his gut. That woman was the one he would have to let go.

“So, Leonid.” Her grin was playful. “Do you like ice-cream with your hot waffles?”

“Actually, I do.” His mouth went desert-dry as he tucked a flyaway coppery strand behind her ear.

It was just a waffle, right?