



Legacy's Call

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Suspense

Description: Whatever it takes. As long as it takes.®

He was born into a legacy of protection and power. David “Ronan” Alexander, son of the legendary owner of Guardian Security, grew up knowing that the weight of leadership would one day rest on his shoulders. Now a seasoned team leader in the world's most elite private security firm, Ronan is prepared for anything—except for the fiery woman who crashes into his life with a mission as dangerous as his own.

She's dedicated her life to rescuing the innocent. Fleur Buchanan is a force to be reckoned with. A vigilante with a heart of gold, she has made it her personal mission to rescue children trapped in the nightmarish world of human trafficking. She doesn't need Ronan's help—until she does. As they work together to dismantle a dangerous ring of traffickers, their mutual respect grows into something far more powerful.

In a world where life-and-death decisions are made during the haze of war, Ronan finds himself torn between his mission and the plans of a woman who is as fearless as she is beautiful.

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CHAPTER 1

“Skipper, five hostages, northwest corner. They’re in the pen like you and Wraith figured. The walls are about ten feet high.” Ronan Alexander swore silently at Wolf’s information. The satellite photos showed the square area. That was where he’d hold hostages, which meant someone had brains in this outfit.

“Guards?” Ronan motioned to Juggernaut, sending him to the left, and then silently signaled Wraith to the right. Stryker moved up behind him as they held.

“Four.” Everyone heard Wolf in their comm devices.

“In your sights?”

“One clear. No movement,” Wolf clarified. They weren’t walking the perimeter, just sitting on it, which made him rethink the intelligence of the people who took the hostages.

“Copy.” Ronan acknowledged Wolf’s report. Wolf was the best marksman on the team and in position as overwatch if they needed cover fire during extraction. He trusted the four men on his team with his life. They were closer than teammates. They were brothers with a link forged through gunfire, blood, sweat, and, yeah, even a few tears.

Ronan glanced at his watch. “Dude, are we clear?”

“Affirmative. No vehicles, people, or aircraft moving in your area. Your C-17 is

twenty-seven minutes out,” Dude, the faceless CCS voice that had worked with them for most of their missions, replied. Someday, Ronan wanted to meet the guy. He’d become the sixth teammate whether or not he knew it.

“Wraith to the east. Jug is west and has the power.” Ronan lifted from his knees into a crouch. “Stryker and I are moving up the center.” The team had been on over a hundred missions together, but there was no such thing as a routine op. He reinforced the plan with his words as he and Stryker moved forward down the center of the small compound to where the hostages were being held. Dude would be able to track his men with the infrared satellite surveillance system.

“Copy,” Wolf said, and then silence reigned as they moved in on the hostages.

Their night vision optics were an advantage that allowed them to move through the dark silently, and they would leverage that edge when Jug cut the electricity. His team advanced silently, using practiced movements and knowing exactly where they’d stop and hold.

“In position,” Wraith said.

“Stryker and I are in position. Cut it, Jug.” Ronan closed one eye while keeping the other open.

“Affirm,” Jug replied.

The lights flickered and then went dark. Ronan dropped his NVGs and opened the eye he’d closed, switching his vision by closing the other eye. He could hear the guards shouting at each other. The mix of Arabic and Kurdish languages was expected.

“Move,” Ronan commanded. The team advanced to the northwest corner of the

compound. One of the guards cursed viciously and argued with another about who would start the generator. Finally, the guard hocked phlegm into the grass and started walking straight toward where Ronan and Stryker had moved. Ronan handed his M-4 to Stryker and pulled out his knife. It was a throwback model, Rambo as fuck, but it fit his hand perfectly.

Ronan let the man walk past him before springing up, slapping his hand over the man's mouth, and slicing his throat. The bastard might not have been one of the men who'd killed two of the hostages on video and blasted it over the internet, but he'd aligned himself with the devil, and Ronan was paying this fucker his due. He pulled the man next to the building and slid his knife back into its sheath before taking his M-4 from his communications and entry specialist.

"One down," Ronan said as they advanced on the holding area.

"Two," Wraith said quietly.

"Target acquired," Wolf said.

"Jug?"

"Hold on," Jug whispered.

Ronan's head popped up as he heard something drop and a bang on what Ronan assumed was the metal wall to the west.

A man called out in Turkish, "What are you doing? Running into walls?" The guy laughed uncomfortably, and after an awkward moment, he called out, "Raafe?"

"Three," Jug said a bit breathlessly.

“Anyone have eyes on four?”

“Negative.” Wraith’s comment was immediate.

“No,” Jug said.

“I have him,” Wolf said. “He has a radio, Skipper.”

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“Take him,” Ronan commanded at almost the same time Wolf’s weapon fractured the silence of the night.

“Down.”

“Move.” Ronan was running as he ordered his men forward. Stryker and Wraith wrangled the barbed wire as Jug cut the shit with bolt cutters from his kit. “Dude?” Ronan had their six, and Wolf had his.

“Nothing ... No, wait, we have movement. People coming out of the barracks. Yep, a vehicle moving now.”

“Which direction?” Ronan demanded.

Dude answered, “Out of the village to your location.”

Ronan turned and looked at his crew. “Jug, get that shit open.”

“Roger.” Juggernaut ripped the barbed wire away, leaned back, and kicked at the door. It slammed open, and the people inside the compound gasped in surprise.

Ronan was the first through the door. He spoke clearly into the darkness. “Jack Tillman?”

“Here, I’m here. Are you American?”

“I am. Everyone up. We have to move now.”

“My wife can’t walk,” an older man said, staying beside a woman on the ground as the three younger men hustled to the gate.

Ronan stopped one of the men who looked strong enough to carry the slight woman. “You, go get her and carry her.”

The man looked confused. “What? Let her husband carry her. Why me?”

Ronan pulled the asshole toward him and growled, “Because I’m carrying a fucking weapon, and I told you to do it, fuckwad.” Selfish people sucked, and that guy had a major pool of suckage going on.

The man who answered as Jack Tillman turned back. “Brandon, do as you're told.”

Ronan sneered at the guy. He motioned Tillman back toward Wraith, his second in command. Brandon swore and went back, none too gently picking up the older woman. Jug stopped him before he took two steps and got about an inch away from the man’s face before hissing, “Listen here, slick, you hurt that nice lady or cause her any undue pain, and I’m going to make it my business to fuck you up. Got it?”

The woman had tears in her eyes, and the older man stood beside the younger, obviously worried about his wife. Brandon snarled, “Yeah, I got it, tough guy.”

Jug still held the guy. He looked over at Ronan. “Skipper, I’ll carry the lady. We need to leave this fuckwad here. He thinks he’s a tough guy. Let him deal with ISIS when they get here.”

“Copy,” Ronan said and turned his back on the gathering.

“What? Man, you can’t do that. They can’t leave me!” Brandon sounded a bit like a thirteen-year-old girl with that whining.

Ronan spun on his heel and walked back to Brandon. “What you fail to realize is I can do anything the fuck I want. This is my team. You are not the mission, Brandon. You. Are. A. Liability. Make yourself useful, and maybe, just maybe, I’ll get your ass back to the States in one piece.” Ronan pointed toward the gate. “Move, now.”

Wolf appeared by the gate. “Skipper, I see headlights.”

“Wolf, get them out of here and to Wraith,” he snapped. Through his comms, he ordered, “Wraith, get these people to the landing site. Don’t hold the plane. If we aren’t there, get the fuck out of the country.”

“Copy,” the deep voice of his second in command answered. Wraith was a man of few words. He spoke primarily through his actions.

“Jug, let’s buy some time.”

The big guy nodded. “On your six, Skipper.”

“Another vehicle leaving the village. Recommend hightailing it out of there, Skipper,” Dude relayed.

“They need time. You heard the situation. What’s the ETA on our bird?” Ronan said as he and Jug ran down the main corridor toward the compound's gate.

“Twenty minutes. Entering the airspace in seven minutes.”

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“Copy.” He motioned for Jug to take the far side of the gate.

“We take these guys out, get their vehicle, and hightail it to the LZ. The woman and her husband won’t make that run. They can ride.”

“You reading my thoughts again?” Jug chuckled. “I’d like to drag Brandon behind the vehicle. Can I please? We really don’t get to have any fun anymore.”

“Meh, is he worth it?” Ronan said as he saw the glare of headlights.

“Worth what?” Jug asked as they both slipped out of the compound and took up positions.

“Trading in your fun card to drag his ass? You only get one fun card a year,” Ronan asked as the Jeep bounced down the rutted road to the holding compound. ISIS had scattered into that part of the world, and some war-hardened fighters could still build and lead a formidable opposition. From what he saw, it wasn’t one of those factions, but he wouldn’t take any risks. They watched the vehicle bouncing down the five-mile-long pitted, rutted trail that someone decided to call a road.

“Damn it, Skipper. Now you got me reconsidering using my card,” Jug complained.

“Don’t hurt yourself with all that thinking,” Wolf said, and they didn’t hear it on the comms; he was close by.

Ronan didn’t smile but knew one of the three men would stay behind with them.

“Where are you?”

“Above you.”

“Didn’t I tell you to get them out of there?” Ronan growled.

“I did. Gave them to Stryker and Wraith. Then I came back.”

Ronan snorted, “Remind me to fire you when this is done.”

“Can’t promise that, Skipper. I don’t think I could make it on the outside. People are too people-ey.” Wolf chuckled.

“God, yes. People-ey. I’m using that, Wolf.” Jug chuckled.

Ronan lifted his weapon. “We all will.” He glanced across the drive. “We need the vehicle. Don’t break this one, Jug.”

“Hey, that was one time—” The sound of Ronan’s M-4 almost obliterated Jug’s answer. The four men in the vehicle were expertly caught in a crossfire between Ronan and Jug. Wolf picked off the one man who’d managed to jump from the Jeep.

“Skipper, you have less than three minutes before the next vehicle,” Dude informed them.

“Roger.” Ronan jumped in the vehicle, turned off the headlights, and waited the five seconds it took for Jug to jump in the back and Wolf to clamber into the passenger seat. He gunned the Jeep through the compound and yelled, “Hang on!” as he drove the Jeep through the fencing.

Metal whipped at him through the open doorway, slashing his cheek. Wolf swore bitterly as he kicked chain-link fencing and shattered the windshield from the window frame and out of the way so they could see where the fuck they were going.

Ronan drove like a crazy man and had his team and the hostages in his sights in less than a minute. Pulling up, he yelled, “Get in!”

He wasn’t sure how in the hell they managed it, but five hostages and five team members clambered onto the frame, and he hauled ass to the landing strip. The trip was insane and far too long for his liking. When he parked on the meadow's edge where the plane would land, he ordered, “Wraith, you have the hostages. Everyone else, a lateral dead zone at a hundred meters starting on me.”

As the team moved, Ronan dropped to his knee, checking his weapon while he got the scoop from CCS. “Update me, Dude.”

“Skipper, they’re idiots. They stopped and looked like they were searching the compound. No other movement. You have time.”

Ronan was damn glad they’d waited until most of the ISIS faction had left the tiny village. They’d dispersed, heading toward another village about ten clicks away. He had no clue why they’d left, but he thanked the big guy for the luck.

“Aircraft?”

“On final,” CCS relayed.

“Wraith, load as soon as they touch down.”

“Affirm,” Wraith acknowledged.

“Stryker, get that woman and her husband into the belly of that bird and stay with Wraith.” Ronan knew Wraith would have the primary in his sights. The fucker needed to be toast, but that wasn’t their mission. They were there to retrieve the son of a bitch. The other younger men would have to move their asses to get on the bird.

They appeared healthy. They damn well could get themselves into the plane.

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“Already got her, Skipper,” Stryker answered.

Goodman. Ronan lifted his weapon and scanned the distance. “Headlights?”

“Nada,” Jug said. The man wasn’t the most military in his comms discipline. Hell, he wasn’t the most military, period.

“Negative,” Wolf chimed in.

“Another vehicle is coming from the village, Skipper. Looks like they were waiting for backup.”

“Party time,” Jug said from his position.

“Jug, switch locations with Wolf,” Ronan ordered.

“Aw, Skipper, I’m faster than I was,” Jug groaned. “I don’t need special favors.”

“Jug, we have one shot to sprint to that bird. You’re not as fast as Wolf and me, and you will need the lead that one hundred meters will give you. Stop arguing and do what the hell I tell you.”

“I’m doing it. I don’t like it, but I’m doing it,” the big guy complained.

Ronan glanced at his watch. Maybe they’d catch a break and bolt to the aircraft before the idiots in the camp advanced.

“Both vehicles are moving toward your location, Skipper.” Well, fuck. Dude dashed that thought as soon as it entered his head.

“Hold until I fire.” He stayed relaxed until he heard the C-17, which would cover any advance by the vehicles. Headlights bounced over the ground. “Hold.” Ronan lifted his weapon. “Take out the vehicles.”

As the C-17 touched down, they unleashed hell on the two vehicles. He heard the aircraft reverse its engines. Wraith and Stryker would be loading as soon as that aircraft slowed enough to turn. Ronan emptied his clip and reloaded in one smooth movement. “Jug, go.” He lit up the vehicles with Wolf. When he’d fired about half his clip, he was up. “Haul ass, Wolf.”

He all-out sprinted to the meadow where the aircraft was powering up. Which meant it was turning around and getting ready to launch. Both he and Wolf slung their weapons over their shoulders. He saw Jug hauling ass across the meadow, losing him after a moment in the dirt and dried grasses that the engines propelled into the air. Wolf was just ahead of him. The aircraft started down the meadow, clearing the debris field as Jug jumped onto the hydraulic gate and rolled, grabbing the grate and extending his arm. Wraith was on the grating with his weapon at the ready. As Wraith started to fire, Wolf grabbed Jug’s arm and immediately reached back for him.

Ronan clutched Wolf’s arm, and Jug pulled them both onto the lifting gate as Wraith continued cover fire. They rolled onto the grating and tumbled into the belly of the bird as the gate lifted and closed.

“Hang on!” Ronan bellowed and grabbed loose straps and metal ribs of the plane as the aircraft launched into a vertical takeoff that tumbled every fucking thing, including two of the hostages, back at him and most of his crew. Ronan grabbed one man, and Jug pulled Brandon in. Looking over at him, Jug lifted his eyebrows comically. Ronan shook his head. Jug cocked his head and pulled the guy out of the

way of a shoe that slammed into the back of the plane. Jug had a heart of gold, but you had to dig to get to it. It was worth the effort.

When the aircraft leveled out, Ronan took the men back up to the front of the plane.

“I told you to strap in,” Wraith said as he stood. His dark hair and blue eyes pinned the two younger men against the aircraft's wall. The younger men were banged up, but they'd live.

Ronan walked over to the older couple where Stryker, their only team member officially trained as an EMT, talked to the woman. “How are you doing, ma'am?”

“I'm in pain, but I'm alive, and I know I have your team to thank for that.” Her face was drained of any color. He turned toward Stryker with a questioning look.

The guy winked at the lady. “Faye and I are betting on a nasty ankle break, but she's tough.”

The woman looked up at her husband. “We've had to be. We've been missionaries over here for the last seven years.”

“But it's time to go home.” Her husband took her hand.

“Yes.” She nodded. “For a while, at least.”

Ronan put his hand on the older gentleman's shoulder. “Sounds like a plan. I'll make sure you get to where you're going.”

“Thank you.” The man nodded. “I know we weren't the reason you were sent.”

“You're right, but I'm glad I was able to be there when you needed the help.”

“Guardian Angels can come robed in camouflage, too,” the man said with a smile.

That pulled a bark of laughter from Ronan. “I’m no angel, sir.” He headed over to where the reason for his team being in-country sat. “Do you have the information?” He wasn’t going to beat around the bush with that fucker, either.

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“I’ll give it up when I get my deal.” The man lifted his shoulders and chin defiantly.

Ronan dropped into a squat in front of the man. “Mr. Tillman, you’ll give me the information now, or I’ll open that door”—he pointed to the access hatch on the side of the plane—“and toss your ass out of this plane. From this altitude, you’ll freeze and shatter when you hit the ground, as will anything you have on you. We don’t care if we get the information you stole. We only care that they don’t.”

“What if it isn’t on me?” the man sneered.

Ronan looked from him to the young men with him. “Then it’s with them. Same process, just three bloody ice chunks instead of one.” He extended his hand. “Now.”

Jack stared at him for a long moment. Ronan’s expression didn’t change. With idiots like that, one must let them process their escape routes to see there was no way out.

“You wouldn’t.” That was what he finally came up with. How eloquent.

Not entirely surprised, Ronan stood up. “Boys, strap in.”

His team rushed to seats and started to strap in. “Wait, you can’t be serious.” Jack laughed. “You’ll suck everyone out of this bay if you open that door.”

Ronan laughed. “You’ve been watching too much television, Jack. How the fuck do you think we jump from high altitudes.” He pointed to a harness system above them. “We’re going to be fine. On the other hand, you and your boys will take a flying leap without a parachute.”

Ronan pulled the harness down and hooked it to the line that ran from one side of the bay to the other. “Which one gets to go first?”

“Dad, give him the information,” Brandon said.

“Dad?” Ronan smiled. “That’s so sweet. These your boys?” Ronan pointed from one to the other.

Jack stared daggers at his son and then back at Ronan. “You won’t do it.”

“Okay. Come on, Brandon.” Ronan unlatched Brandon’s seat harness and pulled him up by the collar. Pissing himself, the young man tried to get away from the hold Ronan had on him. “Dad!”

Ronan dragged the man across the bay. He saw the way the older couple looked at him. Having not heard the conversation, they had no idea what Ronan was doing. He hit the latch light, letting the pilots know he wanted to open the door. The crew chief came out of the flight deck. Ronan looked up at the man standing on the second-story landing. The crew chief looked from Ronan to the guy in his grip. Ronan used sign language:

“All clear. Making a point.”

The crew chief gave Ronan a thumbs-up, walked back into the flight deck, and shut the door.

Brandon screamed at his father as Ronan hit the jump light. It would cycle from red to yellow to green, but it wouldn’t open the door. Brandon begged and pleaded with his father.

Ronan had no intention of throwing the man out of the plane, but he’d fake it until

that bastard gave up the information he was after.

The light went from red to yellow, and Ronan made his last play. He moved in front of the door and grabbed the lever that would open the hatch if he lifted it.

Jack unbuckled his harness and pulled off his boot. “Here it is!” He threw the boot at Ronan. Wraith was out of his seat in a heartbeat to grab the boot. He checked it over and shook his head no.

When Ronan grabbed the lever again, Jack screamed, “It’s under the insole in the heel!”

Wraith pulled out the insole and looked in. He reached into the boot and worked a bit before pulling out an SD card and holding it up between two fingers. Ronan pushed Brandon back toward his father then took the card from Wraith and walked back over to Tillman. “You’re damn lucky you started your blackmail before that piece of shit ISIS remnant took you hostage.”

Tillman didn’t say a word. There was no bravado or begging. Ronan lifted the card. “If this isn’t real, I’ll be right back here. You’ll be the first one out that door this time, and they’ll follow you.” Tillman’s eyes narrowed, but he held his tongue.

“Fucking father of the year material right there,” Jug said over the comms. Ignoring the comment, Ronan gave the chip to Stryker. “Get this to Dude.”

“Rog-o.” Stryker took the card and headed to where his gear was stowed. When he wasn’t being used as a medic, he ran their comms. Tonight, he was the only one with a secure satellite link on his computer system.

“Dude, you have incoming,” Stryker said when he inserted the disk.

“Roger.” Dude acknowledged.

Ronan sat down beside Wraith, who was away from the others. “He has a copy.”

Wraith nodded in agreement.

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“Dude, if this is legit, Tillman and his sons need to be strip searched and their clothes completely disassembled in a search. He’s acting too calm after giving up his bargaining chip. He has at least one copy, if not more. Make sure we have the facilities to do that when we land.”

“I copy.”

Ronan closed his eyes. It was his turn to get some shuteye. Wraith would keep an eye on the team and personnel they’d rescued.

“Skipper?”

Ronan’s eyes popped open immediately. How long had he slept? He glanced at Wraith. “An hour.” The man answered the question he hadn’t asked.

“Go ahead,” he croaked.

“Sorry for waking you up. The information is legit, and you have a mission change.”

All the team’s eyes slotted to him. “What information can you give me?”

“There’ll be a plane on the ground when you land. Friendly forces will handle the delivery of your target and the others. You’ll get on the other plane and head to Syria. Once you arrive at Al-Tanf Garrison, report to the communications building for a mission brief.”

“Roger. Resupply and ammo?”

“Acquired and flying in. You’ll have them before you leave Al-Tanf,” Dude informed him.

“Roger that. Everyone copy?”

He got nods from his team. “ETA to LZ?”

CCS answered, “Forty-five minutes.”

He glanced at his team. “Get some rest. I’ve got them.” He patted his automatic at his hip, making sure Tillman and his boys saw the action.

He sensed his team settle back and take the rest when they could. Learning to fall asleep on command had taken some training, but now, every last one could close their eyes and sleep on command.

He stared at Tillman and wondered where the copy of the information was hidden.

“The quiet son,” Wraith said from beside him. “He’s got the information.”

Ronan chuckled. “Get the fuck out of my head and get some rest.”

Wraith gave a twitch of a smile, his eyes closed. “Roger that.”

Ronan strolled down the corridor of the communications building at Al-Tanf Garrison. When he reached the SCIF, a secure compartmentalized information facility, he stowed all his comm gear and gave his identification to the guard outside the door. After they confirmed he had the clearance and needed to be in the facility, they signed him in and led him to a small, closet-sized conference room. He snorted as he folded into the small chair and shut the door behind him. The video screen was in hold mode until the SCIF operator connected the secure transmission. Secure

comms were only between Ronan and his team via Guardian's earpieces. About a decade ago, Guardian had acquired frequencies for use that only the highest classification of clearances knew about. Guardian and POTUS could communicate via the proprietary secure comm systems. However, when the need arose, such as a comprehensive mission briefing, SCIFs were still used.

The screen activated, and Jacob King frowned. "Ronan, where the hell are you, a coffin?"

"Yeah, almost." Ronan chuckled, glancing at the white foam tile that covered the walls. "I think it was a broom closet that's been repurposed. What do you have for us?"

"An ugly situation. But before I get to that ... You were right. Tillman's son had another SD card on him, which had information not included on the original disk. Good work."

"Wraith called it."

Jacob gave a small smile and looked down at his desk. The man was a legend at Guardian. Hell, all the Kings were, but Jacob had cut his teeth with the original Alpha team and he was the default expert for all current team leaders. His history with the company could fill volumes and probably did somewhere in the dusty halls of his father's business. Jacob sighed. "And now, back to the business at hand. We've been requested to secure an IDP that Children's Hope International is operating so they can draw down and close up. In the past two months, seven of their aid workers have been tortured and murdered. Convoys taking displaced people to safety have been attacked."

"The fuckers are targeting NGO's now?" Non-governmental organizations had been working to save internally displaced people, or IDPs, for years now. They were the

only ones that seemed to be helping because the Syrian Government hadn't done a damn thing to help the women and children torn from their homes by war.

“So it seems.” Jacob nodded. “We’ve got some in-country militia trying to help, but they are clueless about how to do so. Your team is the closest, so you get to organize the chaos. It could take a hot minute before I get you any more help. We’re stretched thin.”

“Uncle Jacob, no one says a hot minute anymore.” Ronan laughed when his honorary uncle flipped him off.

“You know what I mean.”

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“I do. We’ll manage. Supplies?”

“Landing today. I had Deacon go through everything before leaving for Asia with his team yesterday. He had a few special requests we filled before the cargo plane took off.”

“Going to tell me what they were?” His twin brother and he had been leading different teams for almost five years. He rarely saw Deacon, but they texted whenever they weren’t actively on a mission. He figured that was why he’d had no texts when he’d powered up his cell once they’d landed in-country. Deacon preferred working in Asia, and he was a Middle East specialist, so they rarely crossed paths in person.

“Ah, no.” Jacob chuckled. “Nothing illegal or immoral.”

“Good to know.” Ronan snorted. “Better be some saltwater taffy included.”

“We have that stockpiled for the teams.” Jacob lifted a piece and raised his eyebrows.

“We’ve been out for over a week.” His entire team was hooked on the candy. Guardian had developed a recipe that amped up the protein and added vitamins, too, without making it taste like shit. He couldn’t distinguish between the real stuff and the good-for-you candy. Well, better-for-you stuff, at least.

“I added extra. There are one hundred and forty thousand displaced people in twelve IDP camps; from what I understand, the majority of the population in the camp that’s closing is unattended children. You have a pallet of it.”

“Damn, Uncle Jacob, I think a bit of your marshmallow center is showing.”

Jacob barked out a laugh. “Kids are everyone’s weakness.”

“That’s the truth,” Ronan agreed. He’d seen some shit that would curl your toes, but the shit involving kids, damn, it was the things nightmares were made of.

“Speaking of which, how’s your team doing?”

“Good. Why?”

“Heard rumors you and Deacon may be called up to the mountain.”

“Come again?” Ronan tried to lean forward but was wedged in too tight to move much.

“Come on, you had to know this would be coming someday.”

“Yeah, but not today.” Ronan rubbed his cheek. Hell, he hadn’t shaved in a month, and his beard was full.

“Didn’t say today. Said I’d heard rumors. Figure you’d want to know to get your mind in the right line.”

“We were told we’d have a choice.”

“And you will. Unlike me.” Jacob laughed. “Your father twisted my arm and pushed me into the chair.”

“And you’re still in it.”

“I am, but I’m reaching a point where I’d be okay not sitting in it anymore. Not right now, maybe not next year, but I want to spend more time doing things with your aunt Tori.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Ronan nodded. “Damn, not something I thought was coming down the pipe.”

“Exactly what Deacon said.” Jacob leaned back and popped a piece of taffy in his mouth. “Don’t get yourself into a mess with this drawdown. If it gets too dicey, call it. The NGOs are trying to be all things to all people, and we told them the security of their people will come before all else. If you need to, drag them out and load them on a plane. I don’t want anyone with that NGO to die on our watch.”

“No shit.” Ronan nodded. “Access to satellite imagery of the camp?”

“In your kit on the plane.”

“Anything else?” Ronan was ready to hit the shower and scrape a couple of inches of dust off his skin.

“In the brief, I’ve included information on the tunnel system near Aleppo. It’s been ten years since I was there, but my report is included.”

“An emergency egress.” He could see having a backup plan.

“If necessary. Any other communication can be routed through your comms via CCS.”

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“Who do we have for this mission?”

Jacob rolled his eyes. “Dude is your primary, as always. Tink will be his relief.”

“Excellent. Someday, I’m going to shake that man’s hand, and Tink is damn good, too.”

“They’re the best we can get,” Jacob agreed. “You take care of yourself and that team, Ronan, whatever it takes.”

“For as long as it takes, Uncle Jacob. For as long as it takes.” The screen went dark, and Ronan closed his eyes for a moment. Working with local militia was not his favorite pastime. Hell, it didn’t even rate on the top one hundred list. He opened the door and managed to un-wedge his ass from the chair.

After making his way to the barracks, where his team waited for him, he opened the door to see Wraith’s weapon was leveled on him. “Got the spooks?” he asked as he walked in.

“Nope,” Jug said. “Just had an unexpected guest who thought they were going to bunk with us.”

Ronan felt his eyebrows hit his hairline. “No fucking way.”

“Way,” Stryker said. “Had a duffle on his shoulder and, by the looks of him, was greener than a fried tomato.”

Ronan would handle that shit. They were guaranteed a private barracks, a given for all deployments. Guardian would have arranged that in advance of their bed down.

“I’ll work on that issue after we finish here.” He looked at Stryker. “Did you run a scan?”

Stryker flipped him off, meaning he’d scanned the room for listening devices. Ronan pulled a wooden chair out and spun it around, straddling it. “We’re heading for an IDP that’s drawing down. Seven of their staff have been tortured and killed in the last two months.”

“Son of a bitch. They’re targeting the only source of assistance in the fucking country?” Jug shook his head. “Talk about cutting off your nose to spite your ugly-ass face.”

Wolf cocked his head. “Just us?”

Ronan shook his head before muttering, “Local militia.”

Groans came from everyone, including Wraith, which was telling. “Listen, we don’t have a choice in this matter. You know the drill. Alpha will send assistance as soon as he can free it up.”

“How long?” Jug asked.

“As long as it takes to draw down this camp and get the staff out safely. But Alpha did say if it went to hell, we shove the staff into a plane and evacuate.”

“IDPs are full of kids,” Wraith said. “Ain’t leaving the kids to those fuckers, are we?”

Damn, that was a full diatribe from Wraith. “Not if I can help it, but sometimes, we

don't get to dictate extraction, you know that."

Wraith nodded. Jug slapped at a bug that was buzzing around his head. "Someone said showers when we landed."

Ronan chuckled. "Wraith, take your weapon. I'll stand guard here until you get back, and then I'll address the ex-wannabe roommate and grab a shower."

Wraith pushed off the wall he was leaning against. "Let's go." The team grabbed their kits and headed out the door. Before he left, Wraith stopped. "This could get messy, Skipper."

"Yeah, I know," Ronan said, listening to the door shut behind his team. Messy seemed to be his team's forte.

CHAPTER 2

Fleur Buchanan finished the letter, signed her name, and placed the slip of paper in the box that would ship Deb Forrester's belongings home to her family. It was the seventh letter she'd written to people she didn't know to give them some sense of closure. Closure. She closed her tired, dry eyes and prayed that she could cry about Deb's death someday. After the first two deaths, she'd cried for weeks. Then the third, fourth, and fifth attacks and murders happened. She touched the small bear Deb had kept on her bed. She'd said her father had given it to her to keep her safe. Tucking the bear into the box, she said a small prayer for Deb's family. Her grief overwhelmed her to the point of numbness. She couldn't imagine what Deb's family was going through. Despair. Desolation. Anger. And so many questions. She wished she had answers.

Fleur turned to look out the tent's window. The plastic made it hard to distinguish anything other than colors, and people who moved past were a blurred blob. The dark

robes of the unaccompanied women were immediately distinguishable. The children wore whatever they had on their backs or what Children's Hope International was able to get to the camp via the convoys. Supplies were next to impossible to get in, and now, the factions who hunted supply convoys were attacking the convoys they used to send her charges out of the country to safety.

She rubbed her arms, cold in the heat of the day. Her position as anti-trafficking coordinator placed immense pressure on her to find a safe way to get the children to safety. She was responsible for coordinating the convoys with other NGOs at the camp, international agencies, and local authorities. She'd had great success for over a year and a half, and then something had ... changed.

"Fleur, are you done packing Deb's things?" Earl Adams asked from the canvas partition that separated Deb's cot from the other beds in the tent.

Nodding, she turned back to him. "What did we miss? How did this happen again?"

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Earl ran his hand through his thinning hair and shook his head. “Nothing. We followed the checklist to the letter, just like the other times.”

Fleur nodded, knowing what he said was the truth. “Earl, we need to go off books for the next convoy. Someone is leaking information, or maybe someone is selling it? God, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we have a murderer somewhere in the system.”

Earl had been bending down to pick up the box containing Deb’s possessions when he stopped and looked up at her. “What?”

Her lips tightened as she looked past him. “Are we alone?”

“Yeah.” Earl stood up.

“Somehow, information is getting out about our routes or when we’re moving the people.” She put her hands on her hips. “It isn’t us.” She stared at Earl when he just looked at her and repeated. “It isn’t us.”

“No, it isn’t, but you’re pointing a finger without proof. That will ruffle one hell of a lot of feathers.” Earl looked behind him then whispered, “It could get us in a lot of trouble. You know how strict they are about making every notification. If we don’t and something happens? They’ll blame us. They have enough egg on their face that they’ll deflect it in a heartbeat. Especially the governmental agencies. They’re firing people right and left and sending them home because of this without any proof they did anything wrong. We’d be the sacrificial lamb if they could pin anything on us. Period. End of story.”

Fleur drew a deep breath and nodded. “Which is why I’m doing it alone. You aren’t going to be involved.”

“Fleur, you can’t move an entire convoy without supplies, gas, and guards.” Earl picked up the box. “Don’t throw away your career or even your life. We’re drawing down. More militia is coming in to help us, or at least that’s what they’re saying.”

“More militia? Maybethe new oneswon’t fall asleep and let those damn people take whomever they want,” Fleur spat out.

Earl sighed. “What else can we do?”

She looked at him, shaking her head. “Nothing. I’m just so sick and tired of trying to make a difference and the ineptitude of the machine snagging, stalling, and even destroying our hopes of getting these kids to any semblance of safety.”

“We all feel it, Fleur. We all feel it.” He looked at the box. “I’ll get this over to the logistics tent. Youcan’t get a convoy out by yourself, sweetie. It’s impossible.”

She nodded and turned back to the plastic window. They all felt the frustration, but no one was doing a damn thing about it. She couldn’t send out another convoy doing the same planning and coordination as the others and expect different results. That was the definition of insanity, wasn’t it? Snorting, she shook her head. “Maybe we’re all insane for trying to help when their own government doesn’t care about them.”

Her words fell unheard in the empty tent. She closed her eyes. Therehadto be something she could do. But Earl was right. She couldn’t move an entire convoy by herself. That took a staff. But ... She opened her eyes and gasped. No, she couldn’t move anentireconvoy ... but what about a few people at a time? Maybe ... just maybe ... She almost ran out of the tent in search of one of the Syrian women helping register the unaccompanied children.

Fleur found Rana at the admin tent and caught the woman's eye, waving her outside. Rana slipped out of the tent, and Fleur put her arm through Rana's. "Let's take a walk."

Rana glanced at her and laughed. "Why, what is it that you are doing?"

Fleur lowered her voice. "I want to talk to you about something. Something private. Walk with me?"

Rana's brow creased in confusion. "All right." They strolled away from the interior of the camp.

Fleur looked around. "You came from Aleppo, right?" The town wasn't far from where they were near Idlib.

Rana nodded. "Yes. Why?"

They walked a few feet farther before Fleur stopped and stared through the encampment. "How hard would it be to take five or perhaps ten children through the smuggler's tunnels without being seen?"

Rana shook her head. "I don't know the tunnels that well. My husband worked in them to get people out of the country. I didn't."

"But you know someone who does know them, right?" Rana was a well-educated woman who'd lost her husband in the fighting.

"Fleur, you don't understand. Those tunnels are now used to traffic people, not to rescue them."

"Yes, but if we move the children through the tunnels, it could work, right? We could

get them out through our counterparts in Turkey. You've told me about how your husband had gotten supplies into Syria without the militia or warring factions knowing about it." It was a chance. A chance to get some of the internally displaced people out of the country and into the hands of NGOs with the resources to relocate them to safety.

"Women moving children?" Rana shook her head. "No, the men in those tunnels would kill you after they raped you, or if you were unfortunate, they'd rape you and then sell you to others who would use you until you were dead." The woman spat out the words and crossed her arms; her anger, perhaps her fear, was palpable. "It is impossible. To even think such a thing is ridiculous."

Fleur closed her eyes and shook her head. "I have to do something, Rana. Seven convoys. All those people, our friends. Someone has to do something to get these kids and women out of here."

Rana stepped closer to her. "I understand what you feel. I know what it feels like to be hopeless." She glanced right and then left. "I ... could ... No, it is probably impossible."

"What?" Fleur grabbed Rana's hand. "What were you going to say?" Rana pinched her lips shut and stared at her. "Please," Fleur pleaded.

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“There are some men. Men who work to help those who are still in the country. I don’t know if I could get word to them, but I could try.”

Fleur’s heart pounded against her chest. “Please try. Please ... as long as it doesn’t put you in danger.”

Rana nodded. “I don’t know how long it will take or even if they will respond.”

“Anything you could do. I have money. Not a lot, but if needed, I can pay.” She was grasping at straws. “I would want to go with the children and be brought back.”

“It is a two-day walk through the tunnels and back. You’d be missed.” Rana’s lips were pinched tight again.

“I’ll need to work on that so no one would know.” Fleur paced a couple of steps and then turned back to Rana. “I could wear men’s clothing and tuck my hair away.”

Rana looked at her. “It could work. Dirty your face and wear loose clothing.”

“Yes, exactly,” Fleur agreed immediately. “I wouldn’t talk. I’m taller than any Syrian woman.” That was the truth. At five feet ten inches tall, she was taller than most Syrian men, too.

Rana stared at her. “I will try.”

“Thank you.” Fleur hugged the woman tightly.

Rana grabbed her by the arms and held her away. “I will not accept thanks for sending you into danger. How will you select the people to go with you, and what happens if you don’t make it?”

Fleur’s enthusiasm fell immediately. “I’m not important if I don’t make it. I have no one back in the States. My father died last year.”

“And how would you pick which of us would go with you?” Rana asked again.

Fleur put her hands on her hips and stared at the toes of her dusty boots. “The oldest boys and girls. They’re in the most danger.” When the camp was shuttered, any remaining internally displaced people, specifically children, would be vulnerable. In all probability, the boys would be forced to fight. The factions forced boys as young as eight into war as soldiers or suicide bombers. Of course, some boys were forced into prostitution, too. The girls, as young as eight, were forced to marry members of ISIS and were then beaten, sexually abused, and forced into a life of sexual slavery. And the Syrian Government turned a blind eye to the abuses, failing to condemn the practices or speak out against them in any way.

Rana copied Fleur’s pacing motions as she thought. “It would violate the directives of the camp.”

“When we follow the directives, people die,” Fleur said as she watched her friend pace. “I can’t keep doing the same thing.”

Rana stopped. “You aren’t doing the same thing. You’re not responsible. There is a process to protect everyone.”

“Then who’s responsible? Someone has to be, and they aren’t protecting the convoys. They’re closing this camp down, and what happens when our time runs out? What happens to everyone? What happens to you?” Fleur’s eyes filled with tears. “Debbie,

Sarah, Carl, Tran, Fen, Lou, and Mel are dead. And how many children were taken? What about them? They're either fighting a war, forced labor, prostitutes, or married off to monsters. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to help."

Rana walked up to her. "Ask yourself this, Fleur: What will happen to you if you take those people and can't get back? While I try to contact the men I used to know, think about that. Sometimes, self-preservation is all you have left inside you. So many here in this camp and outside have nothing left except that thought. If they can live longer or better because they turn you over to these people, they will. Whether it is for food, passage out of here, or favors for the future, they will use knowledge of what you are doing to take care of themselves. So, you can tell no one. No one. That means you're completely alone with desperate people during desperate times. Knowing this, I wouldn't make the journey. What makes you think you'll survive or come back?"

Fleur stared at her friend. "I understand the risks. I know nothing is guaranteed. But I have to investigate the possibility. It'll be worth it if I could get one person to another camp that won't be shuttering."

"And how will you tell the people in the other camps where to meet you? The tunnels have outlets everywhere."

Fleur stopped short. She hadn't thought that far ahead. All of this was a leap of faith, and she was flying at warp speed without any navigation. "I ... I don't know. But I can work on that. I'll figure it out." She had time, didn't she? Rana's contacts would take time to reach.

Rana put her hand on Fleur's shoulder. "Be sure you want this, Fleur. Be sure there is no other way."

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, Fleur looked back at the vast expanse of tents that

housed the displaced people of Syria. What had happened wasn't acceptable. "I need to pursue it, and I will find a way to make it work." She'd spend every dollar in her savings to grease as many palms as possible. No matter how often she had to go through those tunnels and risk her life. Saving the kids would be worth it.

Rana frowned and then lifted her chin. "Someone is coming."

Fleur turned around and watched one of the young boys run toward them. The boy animatedly spoke to Rana and then turned to run back to the camp.

"You have a call from the States. They will call back in fifteen minutes. Nasir said he has been looking for you for a long time and that you should return now." Rana turned, and they walked back together. At the admin tent, Rana whispered, "Think about this, Fleur."

"I will." She had no doubt she would think of little else. The walk to the communications tent didn't take long.

She walked in, and Adil, one of the local nationals who helped with communications, handed her the satellite phone. "You have one minute until he calls back."

"Thank you." She took the phone and walked over to the table in the corner of the tent. It wasn't long before the phone shrilled, and she answered it. "Fleur Buchanan."

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“Fleur, this is J.J. Hines. Do you know who I am?”

Fleur’s gut dropped. He was the chief of security for the entire company. She’d only ever heard of him in passing and had never spoken to him. Why was he calling her?
“I do.”

“Good. I’ve been working with a private security firm, Guardian Security. They’ve managed to free a team up to assist you with the drawdown of the camp. We don’t want another person lost. Guardian will control the local militia and the camp’s security.”

Fleur jerked. Her hopes launched, and she immediately asked, “And the convoys?”

“I’m waiting for more intel on where the groups got their information. Until we know who’s responsible for the leak, we can’t risk our people or the lives of those we care for. Guardian Security will have the final call on any more convoys.”

“But, sir, we have a deadline to get these people to other NGOs or out of the country. If we miss it, they’ll be left here, unattended. We might as well serve them up on a platter.” She ran her fingers through her hair.

“One step at a time, Buchanan. Rushing our response isn’t smart, and it isn’t what we’ll do. I’ve been told the camp coordinator has been informed about Guardian’s pending arrival. You will be Guardian’s primary contact since you’re our organization’s anti-trafficking officer and coordinate the convoys at that location. I need you to take them through what you do to organize and equip a convoy, who you contact, and what happens at each step of the way. Having outside eyes on the

process could help us determine what's happening. As I said, their team leader will make the final call on future convoys."

"And if we do everything they say, will we have more time to move the IDPs?" She clutched to that hope as she asked. The attacks had put their drawdown timeline down the tubes. They needed an extension to get the kids to safety.

"Out of the country? Probably not. To another IDP camp? I hope to be able to convince the chairman of that necessity. There's a good chance of that if we can protect the convoys. There'll be no UN security. They've already declined to help, so Guardian is our last shot. They're good, damn good." The man sighed. "I know what you're going through over there. I spent my time in the trenches."

"Oh, really? How many of your friends died?" It was a sharp and bitter question, but she knew for a fact he didn't know what she was going through. No one did unless they'd been in this camp and been the one who coordinated the convoys.

There was an audible sigh on the other end of the line. "That's a fair question. None."

"And I've lost seven. Seven workers for this company and other NGOs who believed in what we were doing died, and all those people from the camp are gone. You know what's happening to them. Yet everyone here and abroad has twirled their fingers and shrugged when we've asked for investigations and more protection." Fleur stood up and started pacing. "How many more will be trafficked and killed before this damn government will stand up for its people."

"Buchanan, we can't change the governments of this world or the way they make us operate in each country. All we can do is our best. Right now, our best is paying for elite security operatives to come and assist you as we draw down."

She frowned. "Elite security operatives?"

“Guardian Security, to be precise, a subsidiary of Guardian International, performs duties outside regular channels. They’re the absolute best at what they do. They’re a sanctioned entity in the United States, federally recognized but hired by more nations than you can imagine. Technically, I guess you’d classify them as a private security firm when they’re working overseas. I’ve known of several missions where Guardian has freed Americans from desperate situations, protected humanitarian efforts, and provided safe passage for people stuck in a world of hurt.”

“And they’ll help us.” She sighed. “It only took people dying.”

“Buchanan, again, we’re doing what we can.”

Fleur didn’t say anything for a moment then blurted, “If we expose what the host nation is doing, or in this case, not doing, maybe we could force them to protect their people.”

“Do you really think one person or one organization ringing the alarm would stop this country from doing what it’s always done?”

“Which is profiting off the lives of their displaced people. It’s sickening.” Fleur lifted her hand in a helpless gesture as she spoke. As if this man sitting in an office half the world away could see her.

“Do I need to send a replacement to draw down the camp? You’ve been under stress that most people would crumble under.”

Fleur’s heart raced, and she rushed her answer. “No. No, you don’t have to replace me.” If they did, she might be unable to help get the IDPs out of the country or into another camp. “I’m tired, but I’ll work with the new security personnel when they arrive.”

“It isn’t anything to be ashamed of, Buchanan. I do understand your stress.” He rushed on before she called him on that bullshit. “Not that I’ve been through what you’re going through. Rather, I understand what stress can make a person do. I need assurance that you aren’t going to do something stupid.”

Fleur’s eyes widened. He couldn’t know. “Meaning?”

“Depression is a very real concern at the moment.”

She tossed back her head and laughed. “God, no. No, it’s not a concern for me. I’m going to fight for these people. I’m mad; I’m not depressed.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Positive,” she reassured him. “When is your security team going to be here?”

“It’s being arranged now so their arrival could be within the month.”

“All right. Did you have anything else?” She was over this call.

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“No, I’ll call the camp coordinator, your lead, Miller Dupre, to ensure he knows you’re the security team's point of contact. I don’t want anyone to override you regarding the safety of four people. He has a say with the IDPs, but we’re the people moving them, and our organization is paying for them. We’ll be the point of contact, not him.”

“I appreciate that. I don’t think he’ll have a problem with it. I’ll keep him informed.” She knew Miller would understand. Miller Dupre was about sixty, an ole southern boy, and damn sharp. He knew she’d done everything correctly, and nothing she’d done to get more eyes on the issue had moved the needle, so having real security instead of relying on the militia would be welcome.

“We’re doing everything we can on this end.”

The comment came across as an apology, which melted any remaining anger as quickly as a blowtorch hitting an ice cube. “I know, sir. I know you are. It’s just so hard. These children and unaccompanied women look to us for protection and assistance. Seven convoys out of the last fifteen have been hit. Someone has to be giving out the information.”

“My thoughts exactly. But finding out who is almost impossible. There are so many entities involved in the logistics of the movements.”

“Maybe there’s another way.” She glanced out the plastic window of the tent.

“Not that we can legally move forward with, unfortunately. Good luck, Buchanan.”

“Thank you, sir.” She ended the call and handed the phone back to Adil. “Thanks.”

“Good news?” Adil asked as he replaced the satellite phone in its charger.

“No, not really. We’re getting a Band-Aid to stop a hemorrhage.” She headed back to the admin tent. Until the camp shuttered, there was still work to do, and she’d be damned if she dropped the ball. These women and children needed someone to be there for them.

CHAPTER 3

Ronan watched the ragtag group of vehicles approach the meeting point. Wolf was in position just in case things got sticky. Jug, Stryker, and Wraith were spread out, appearing to be lounging around, but they weren’t. The four-by-four Jeep and modified trailer attached to it carried their provisions, ammo, and several surprises for the fuckers attacking those convoys. One thing they learned about the militia in these countries was that trust was earned; it wasn’t given, especially on first meeting the cadre they’d be working with. And Ronan had good reason not to trust this contingent.

The vehicles pulled to a stop, and the occupants dismounted in a careless, haphazard fashion. Ronan watched as the men stretched, leaving weapons in the vehicles, and one whipped out his dick and took a piss on the wheel of the fucking vehicle. His disdain for the crew grew by the second.

A slender man sauntered toward Ronan with an ammo belt perched on his hip and an automatic dangling near his knee. The look was ridiculous, and the ability to use the weapon rested somewhere in the no-way-in-hell category. He stopped in front of Ronan and looked him up and down. The contempt in his gaze was obvious and belligerent. “You are the Guardian, the professional soldier?” Slim, as Ronan had already tagged him, spoke in English.

Ronan lifted an eyebrow and leveled the coldest stare he could conjure on the man. “That depends on who’s asking.”

A couple of Slim’s men turned at Ronan’s comment, their weapons inching his direction. “I am Bilal, Captain of the Northern Front Liberation Force.” The little guy puffed up and extended his arm back toward his men.

Jug pushed away from the tree where he was leaning. His M-4 was tilted in the direction of the approaching men.

Ronan stood up and walked over to the man. “I’m the Guardian, as you said. I was told you would have sixty men.” He looked over the bedraggled men. “I count half that. Where are the rest of your men?”

“Not here.” The man shrugged. “You have us.”

Ronan crossed his arms over his chest and drawled, “Nah. Thanks, but no thanks.”

Slim blinked and jerked a bit. “What does this mean?”

Ronan shrugged. “I’d rather not work with half of what we need.”

“Then you will go alone?” The man laughed. “You will die.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’ll wait for others. You don’t think we’d depend on only the local militia, do you?”

The man narrowed his eyes. “What others?”

“More of us.” Ronan shrugged. “I could use some downtime as we wait.”

“You got that right,” Stryker agreed from where he stood.

Slim’s eyes traveled to the trailer attached to the armored Jeep they were driving. There was a hunger in his eyes. He wanted the contents even though he didn’t know what it was. Greed was still alive and strong, and Slim needed a fix. The guy shook his head. “No. This is not what was agreed.” Slim’s frown deepened, and his eyes darted from Ronan to Wraith, who hadn’t said a word but was silently standing overwatch on Jug, Stryker, and him.

“You’re right. You didn’t hold up your end. It isn’t what was agreed.” Ronan turned to walk away, but Slim grabbed his arm.

Three M-4s were leveled and pointing at Slim and the group of men who’d congregated to listen to a conversation they probably couldn’t understand. When one of Slim’s men reached for his weapon, a red dot laser sight popped on Slim’s chest. That freaked the crew out in fine fashion.

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“Don’t ever touch me.” Ronan leaned over the shorter man.

“I can get the men you need,” Slim said. “They are near.”

“No shit,” Ronan deadpanned. “Five vehicles, approximately twenty-five men plus a supply truck, three clicks to the west behind that stand of hills.”

Dude chuckled. “I like how you use my information, Skipper.”

Ronan didn’t respond to their operator with the satellite feed. “Tell your vehicles and supply truck to come in.”

Slim looked up into the sky. “You have drones?”

Ronan snorted. “We don’t need drones.” He lowered his voice so only Bilal could hear him. “I won’t be tricked. Your men are waiting for us to follow you out, and then you were going to try to kill us and take our weapons.”

“No, this is not true,” Slim said. “We did not know if you were the right people. I would not risk my command. It was a tactical decision.”

“It was an attempt to get something for nothing. You work for me, and you’ll be paid better than anyone else in this country. You fuck with me one more time, and none of your crew will live to see the next sunrise.”

“Jets will be overhead in thirty seconds. Damn, am I good, or am I good? Get ready to be fucking rocked. Low altitude strafing run inbound.” Dude gave him the

countdown.

“You speak big words for only four men.”

“Ten. Nine.” Dude counted down the jets.

“Guess again.”

Two F15s screamed overhead. Every one of Bilal’s men and Bilal himself dropped to the ground. Just past the hills where the vehicles were waiting, the jets released their high-powered weapons, and the dust plumed in the air as the practice run ended and the jets angled up and exploded into the sky.

“Damn glad the Syrian Air Force could be hacked and rerouted so easily.” Dude laughed. “Child’s play.”

Ronan didn’t answer the man as Slim got up and dusted himself off. “We are never alone,” Ronan told him. “We have resources you can’t comprehend. Your leaders made a deal with my people. Honor it.”

Bilal glared at him but eventually nodded. He turned and yelled at his men in Arabic. Ronan heard the men grumble, but the tone was of respect and awe. Bilal stopped that in its tracks with several sharp words.

He got into his banged-up truck without a roof, stood up, and shouted, “You will follow us!”

Ronan stood where he was and shook his head. “No. You’ll follow us.”

Bilal scoffed. “You don’t know where you are going.” He waved his arm and laughed cynically. “The area is vast.”

Ronan whistled, and Wolf dropped out of the tree where he'd been concealed.

Jug jumped into the Jeep and stood behind the M-240 machine gun attached to a specialty mount. He made a show of pulling back the charging handle on the fierce weapon and swiveled the gun to hold the men under his sights. Wraith hopped into the driver's seat, fired up the Jeep, and Ronan, Stryker, and Wolf took their positions one at a time. Wraith put the vehicle in gear and took off, going around the bottleneck area where the rest of Slim's people were waiting.

"You're going to have to watch your back, Skipper. You made a fool of him," Dude said as they drove.

"People like Bilal are ruthless," Jug said. "If we'd followed them, we'd be dead. Now, he knows we won't be tricked. Power and money equal respect out here. Skipper showed him power and offered him money. His greed will keep him in line."

"For a while," Ronan added.

"Damn, glad I'm back here with my cheesy chips, soda, and air conditioning," Dude sighed.

"Just don't choke on a chip," Stryker said.

"Or burp in my ear," Jug added.

"Bathroom breaks during a firefight are discouraged," Wolf interjected.

"This," Wraith spoke one word, and the entire team laughed along with Dude.

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Ronan smiled as his group let off steam. The meeting between his team and Bilal's people was structured to show the militia they were working with a superior force. But if that militia decided to take them out, they'd be hard-pressed to come out of the firefight unscathed, even with superior technology and weaponry. That was the why of the meeting. Keep Captain Bilal's group guessing. Never let them get settled or too close. Those were lessons learned through trial and error, but they were lessons Ronan and his team would never forget. The militia, in most cases—not all, but most—were bands of men out for themselves. Those fighting for freedom were rare; most had been eliminated or pushed from the country long ago. Now, the factions fought each other for resources they could acquire. Resources meant money, and money could buy power.

The militia trailed after Ronan's vehicle and the towed trailer. Jug was facing backward, watching the procession and keeping an eye on their six. Dude had the airspace cleared, but the satellite had passed, so the road ahead was full of one hell of a lot of unknowns. The GPS was locked on the camp and based on mapping. Dude had given them the smoothest yet most direct route to the IDP camp.

Their point of contact in the camp was the anti-trafficking officer for Children's Hope International, one F. Buchanan. Ronan knew the guy had been through hell in the last couple of months, so as soon as he got the rundown on how the convoys were planned and organized, he'd make the call if he and his team could protect the camp and the convoys. The information included in the equipment shipment Guardian had flown in stressed the camp's protection. Still, it also included a directive to try to assist in the relocation of the IDPs if at all possible. More personnel and equipment would be inbound, but that would be a minimum of a month away due to the missions currently underway. Suffice it to say, the world was a fucking mess right now, and

Guardian only had a finite amount of personnel. Granted, it was double the amount it had had been ten years ago. He applauded Gabby and Charley for the growth of the organization. The girls and Archangel had built a hell of an infrastructure, and the company was thriving, but fuck him standing, he could use some support in country with this mess. However, his team was seasoned by a host of missions, and they'd done more with less.

As they crested a ridge, Ronan saw the camp. Wraith slowed and then stopped. The camp they'd seen in the satellite photographs couldn't prepare them for the visual before them. A sea of shelters stretched through the small valley. Wraith seemed to catch himself and again put his foot on the gas. As they bounced over the scraggly vegetation heading for the camp, the composition came into view. There were a few tents, but most of the camp was built from whatever the occupants could find. Pieces of tin, canvas, and old clothes stitched together. Ronan noticed how tightly compacted the rows of shelters were positioned as they drove near the camp. Narrow dirt lanes separated the shelters that shared walls, cloth, or sometimes boards. Occasionally, he got a whiff of food cooking.

Wraith drove into the camp and stopped their vehicle in front of a tent with a faded logo and Children's Hope International printed on the side. From a larger tent to the right, a man strode out directly to them. "Welcome. I'm Miller Dupre, the camp coordinator. We've been expecting you. I was relieved when they told us you were coming almost three weeks ago." He stuck out his hand as Ronan got out of the Jeep.

"Ronan Alexander," he introduced himself, purposely using the last name that couldn't lead anyone to the Xavier family or any of their secrets. Major NDAs and background checks would need to be completed before he'd ever consider introducing himself as an Xavier.

"Guardian Security, right? What is that exactly?" Miller asked.

“A federally recognized law enforcement organization stateside. Our missions deal with everything from personal security to privately funded military operations in hostile areas—like this.” Ronan’s attention shifted to the ragtag militia they’d brought with them. They’d stopped outside the camp and didn’t enter. Jug had the M-240 still pointed at them, and he hadn’t stopped observing the convoy.

“The militia’s camp is on the far side,” Miller said. “We don’t let them inside. Our population is mostly unaccompanied children and women. We don’t want any problems.”

“Problems?” Stryker asked as he got out of the Jeep.

Miller nodded. “Some feel that unattended women, girls, and boys are fair game.”

“For what?” Wolf asked.

Miller put his hands on his hips. “Use your imagination. They do.”

“I’ll handle it,” Wraith said and whistled at Jug.

“I got you, man,” Jug said as Wraith walked to the truck where Bilal was riding. The conversation lasted about ten seconds before Wraith turned and strode back. The vehicles powered up and headed to where Dupre said the militia encampment was headed.

“That was the quickest I’ve ever seen a contingent of that size move,” Miller said. “Maybe they’ll be better than the ones we have now.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Ronan said. “We have our equipment and some things for the camp. Not much due to the lack of space in the trailer, but we brought fuel for your generators, batteries, cases of canned food, medicines, and a few other things.”

“God, that’s amazing,” Miller said. “We need everything you can give us. We’re lucky here; we have a well with good water, but water doesn’t keep people alive, and supplies are sporadic. We’ve lost so many vehicles and people that getting anything out or in has been dangerous, and we’re running on fumes.”

“Do you have a place we can set up?”

“Right over there would work. Do you need help unloading the trailer? We could use any medical supplies you have right now, and the fuel wouldn’t be refused either.” Miller rubbed his hands together. “You guys are better than old Santa himself right now.”

Ronan didn’t doubt it. “Give us an hour to unload and set up, and we’ll pack the supplies wherever they need to go. I want to ensure it doesn’t get intercepted by anyone.”

Miller glanced up at him, and he frowned. “There isn’t too much worry about that inside the camp.”

Jug jumped down from his position behind the machine gun. “Sir, it’s our job to ensure there’s zero worry inside this camp.”

Miller rubbed the top of his bald head. “Not sure how to digest that. It’s been so damn long since we’ve had any help.”

Seeing the man tear up a bit, Ronan put his hand on the guy’s shoulder. “We’re not the complete solution, but we’re going to make damn sure your problems don’t get any bigger.”

Miller sniffed a bit and nodded. “Sorry.”

“Ain’t nothing to be sorry about. We get it,” Jug said. “Wraith, you want me to drive this over and start the setup while you and Ronan do the recon with Buchanan?”

Wraith tossed him the keys without comment, and Stryker and Wolf got back into the Jeep and drove to the spot Miller had indicated. Wolf walked a bit away and stood guard as Jug and Stryker started to set up camp. Ronan and Wraith would meet with this Buchanan fellow and then help.

“Is Buchanan available?” Ronan asked Miller.

Miller turned to his right and looked back into the camp. “Yeah, yeah, I think so. Let me ... Oh, here she comes.”

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She? Ronan lifted his eyes to look in the direction Miller now faced. Walking down the tight path was a woman wearing form-fitting, faded blue jeans, work boots, a blue t-shirt, and a green vest with yellow letters spelling “CHI” down the right side. Her reddish-blond hair was pulled back, but a thick braid trailed over her shoulder. She wore no makeup and needed none. The sun had kissed her skin, and there was a spray of freckles on her cheeks and over her nose. She was tall, slender, and almost looked fragile; that was, until he saw her eyes. The blue of those eyes had seen too much. He’d seen that expression on warriors, soldiers, and people who had survived traumatic events. Still, he swallowed hard. She was beautiful and so damn unexpected in the bowels of a war-torn hell.

She stopped in front of them and measured both him and Wraith with a hard look. “You’re the Guardian team? I’m Fleur Buchanan, anti-trafficking officer for Children’s Hope International.”

“We are. I’m Ronan Alexander. This is Wraith. Over there is Jug, Wolf, and Stryker.”

The woman glanced at the men setting up camp as he pointed to them. She returned her gaze to him and cocked her head before asking, “They don’t have real names?”

Ronan chuckled. “They do, but we don’t use them.”

“Yet you introduced yourself. What’s your handle?”

“Skipper,” Wraith provided as he shot his friend a quick look. The asshole chose now to talk? He needed to have a come-to-Jesus meeting with the troublemaker.

“Because you’re the boss?” Her questions were rapid and direct. He liked that.

“Yes.” He crossed his arms. He could flow with direct. Niceties were something he pulled out in the States when he had to. His time in Guardian had been spent with warriors as direct as she was. “I was told you’d walk us through the process of convoy coordination.”

“I will. When do you want to go over it?” She talked to him as she watched his team start to unload the trailer they’d hauled across the country. The containers they unloaded were easy to identify. “Oh my God! Is that fuel?” A smile flashed, and her eyes lit up.

“Fuel, medicine, and food,” Miller said.

Ronan grunted when the woman threw herself at him and hugged him tightly. “Thank you! Thank you, thank you!” Her slight body was molded to his, and he discovered she was stronger than she looked as she squeezed him tightly.

Not sure what to do, he patted her back gently. The hug lasted a bit longer than it should, and he looked over at Wraith, who had the smarts to turn away as he smiled, his shoulders twitching as he laughed silently. The fucker.

Fleur pulled back and laughed. “Christmas in August! Thank you so much. I can get the staff to help unload.”

“They want to do it,” Miller said. “I already offered.”

She looked questioningly at him. “We could really use the supplies, as in now.”

He shrugged. “We have things that are dangerous in that trailer.”

Fleur frowned. “Dangerous? What do you mean?”

“Ammo.” And some special toys his twin brother Deacon had sent along, but no one needed to know about those things.

“Oh.” Fleur deflated. “You’ll have to forgive us. We’ve been rationing fuel forever, and we’re almost out. The food situation is one step above the fuel situation, but not by much.”

“We heard.” Ronan shrugged his weapon sling back into its proper position, which had jockeyed out of place when she’d hugged him. Not that he minded the hug. It had been one hell of a long time since he’d held a woman against him. And she was all woman. To say he hadn’t noticed when she’d hugged him would be the lie of the year, if not the decade. She was just the right height, and she had a banging, hot body, too. He liked that she was taller. He’d grown up around tall women. His aunts, well, honorary aunts Jade, Jasmine, Tori, Keelee, and even Jewell, were all tall. And while not as tall, his mom was a woman no one would mess with. He’d been raised to respect women and what they were capable of doing. His sisters were epic examples of success on an international level.

“Skipper?” Dude’s voice rang through the comm device lodged in his ear.

Ronan tipped his head. “Go ahead, Dude.”

Fleur jumped a bit, and she looked around. “Who?—”

Ronan lifted his hand and listened. “Two vehicles have left the militia encampment and are heading north.” The satellite must be over them again. Dude always had their six.

“Trail them as long as you can.”

“You know it,” Dude said. “How bad is the camp? I can only see from outer space.”

Jug answered so Miller and Fleur couldn’t hear him. “Think of any refugee camp you’ve seen and multiply it by a thousand. The food supplies we brought will last only a day or so.”

“I could try to get supplies airdropped in.”

“In a sovereign country’s airspace?” Ronan asked as he studied his boot. “Good luck.”

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“Let me try. I know a guy who knows a guy, or at least he did.” Dude’s voice was tinged with the I’m not going to fail attitude he usually retained for the hardest challenges they faced.

“Let him, Skipper,” Wraith said quietly beside him. He gave the slightest nod toward the camp.

Ronan glanced back at the sea of shelters. Yeah, he got it. Any chance was better than no help. Ronan lifted his head and nodded. “Concur. You have my go-ahead; use my name if anyone gives you a hard time.”

“I always do, Skipper,” Dude said before leaving the channel.

Ronan looked at their hosts. “Sorry, we were talking with our communications specialist.”

“How?” Fleur put her hands on her hips. “ESP?”

Miller barked a laugh. “That would be something, but yeah, how were you talking to him?”

Ronan smiled. “Through our communication system.”

Fleur’s eyes raked over him ... slowly. She finally lifted her eyes to his. “I don’t see a phone or radio.”

Ronan smiled at her. He wasn’t going to discuss their comm systems. “Then our

equipment manager has done his job well. If you'd give us an hour or so, we'll have the supplies sorted, and you can show us where to deliver them."

Fleur nodded. "I can do that. Do you need anything from us?"

"No, we're self-sufficient at the moment. Thank you." Ronan turned on his heel, and Wraith fell into step beside him.

After walking about a hundred feet, Wraith elbowed him and said, "Pretty."

He looked at his friend and narrowed his eyes. "And?"

Wraith chuckled. "Seems to like you."

"You're insane." Ronan dismissed the idea.

"Nope," Wraith said. "Been tested."

Jug laughed. "We've all been tested. Except Wolf."

"If she's pretty and into you, you should go for it, Skipper," Wolf chimed in. "And I've been tested. Don't be a fucker, Jug. I'm almost normal."

"That's debatable," Stryker taunted.

Jug snorted out a laugh. "I haven't been a fucker in a long, long time, asshole. For me, female company is required for that activity."

Stryker laughed. "Skipper, if you don't want her, I'd be happy to step up."

"No one is stepping up or going after anyone." Ronan was ending the stupid

conversation. “Remember where you are and what these kids and women have been through.”

The comms fell silent immediately. “Sorry, Skipper. That was insensitive of us.” That was Jug—the softest heart under the hardest shell.

“Noted, and apology accepted. Let’s keep focused, guys,” Ronan said. The fact that he didn’t want his team sniffing around the woman wasn’t lost on him. That was a danger sign flashing neon bright on a pitch-dark night. He needed to forget the feel of her softness against him and screw his head on straight. The middle of an IDP camp was not the time or place to be attracted to anyone.

Wraith looked at him and lifted an eyebrow as if calling him on his thoughts. Thankfully, they’d reached the trailer, and there was no time for Wraith to push his luck further. It was time to set up camp and unload.

CHAPTER 4

Fleur watched the big men stride away. She’d been working in Syria for so long that seeing an American dressed in a combat uniform and carrying a gun was striking. Or perhaps it was the man himself because that man was the type of man all fantasies were made of: tall, dark, good-looking, and commanding. He was a natural leader; the power that rolled off him was tangible.

“We can use that fuel.”

She was so lost in her thoughts that Miller’s words startled her. She nodded. “Definitely. They’re a change from the usual consultants.” Fleur went into her tent and grabbed a canvas chair. She brought it out and sat down to watch the men as they worked.

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Miller was still there when she sat down. He crossed his arms and said, “Thank God. It’s about time we had some competence here. I don’t care if they’re hired muscle. But I’m not sure they can wrangle the local militia into submission. The best we ever got was reluctant and mediocre help. Speaking of which, I heard you were trying to meet with people outside the camp.” Miller spoke casually as they watched the men unload the trailer with an expediency and precision that only years of working together could bring.

She blinked and jumped out of her chair when she realized what he’d said. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Buchanan, I have my sources, and no, it wasn’t Rana. But she had to talk to people to get the information to the men she used to know. They talked to me.”

Fleur licked her lips. “I can explain.”

Miller held up his hand. “No need. I get it. You do what you need to do, but this won’t come down on this camp, understand? If you go through with this plan, it isn’t on my organization. The idea is too fucking risky, but I’ve known you long enough to know you won’t stop if you have your mind set on something.”

She winced internally at the reprimand. “I’m just looking for options.”

Miller nodded. “As I said, you do what you need to do. I have work, and you have mercenaries to deal with.”

“Mercenaries?”

Miller looked at her and lifted an eyebrow. “What else do you call hired paramilitary?”

“Salvation?” Fleur countered.

Miller chuffed a laugh. “That is yet to be seen.” He walked back to his tent, and Fleur sat back down.

Miller’s words lingered in her mind. She understood he was connected but hadn’t known how connected until now. Well, he wasn’t going to stop her, which she was grateful for, but him knowing what she was doing wasn’t in her plans. A lot of things hadn’t been in her plans.

Her eyes followed the leader of the team. Ronan. What an unusual name. She’d hugged him. Goodness, what a forward thing to do. But the excitement of having unexpected supplies had launched her at the man in immediate gratitude. The muscles under that uniform were hard and tight, and she may have been selfish and hugged him for a bit too long. The feeling of strength and, yes, protection when she was in his arms was something she didn’t know she needed. Being strong for everyone had taken its toll. So, sue her if she took a few precious seconds for herself in a stranger’s arms. Lord knew she’d given hugs to so many children in this camp. Physical contact was almost medicinal. Staring at the tall form of Ronan Alexander as he worked, she smiled. She could like that medicine. He was better than a teaspoon of sugar. She snorted and chuckled.

Rana appeared beside her. “Who are they?”

“Hi. They’re Americans. They have fuel and some supplies.”

“They’re building a tent. Are they staying?” She sat down on the ground beside Fleur.

“They are. They’ll be helping with security for the convoys—hopefully.”

Rana’s head jerked toward her. “So, you won’t need to use the tunnels?”

Fleur’s eyes narrowed as she watched the men erect the tent in record time. “I’m not sure. Why?”

“I received word from the people I know. They’ll be in the area in three weeks and will talk to you outside the camp. They don’t want to be seen near here.”

Fleur peeled her eyes off the men and looked down at Rana. “Outside?”

Rana nodded. “Don’t do it. I don’t know if these men have changed or if the same men are together.” Rana put her arm on Fleur’s. “Let these Americans help. There are fates worse than death, Fleur. You know this. The plan is foolish.”

It was, but she was desperate to get as many people out of the camp as possible before they shuttered it. “Tell them I’ll meet with them.” She held up her hand. “If the Americans can help, I won’t go. But I need to have a backup plan, Rana.”

The woman’s lips disappeared as she stared at Fleur. “I do not like it. You shouldn’t do it. Don’t meet with them, Fleur. It isn’t the way forward.”

“Neither do I, but I have to do something. And, Rana, be careful who you talk with,” Fleur said.

“What do you mean?”

“Miller knows.”

“How?” Rana frowned.

“I’m not sure, but he does. He won’t stop me, but he isn’t happy.”

Rana shook her head. “He should.”

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Fleur chuckled. “He knows I’ll just look for another way. Shuttering this camp is a mistake, and I’ve been banging that drum since we were first notified, and that was before all the trouble with the convoys. I’ve written so many emails and made asmany calls as I could. There are more IDPs than facilities, and they’re shuttering us. Ridiculous.”

“It doesn’t make sense. Are you sure you want me to tell my contacts you will meet them?”

“Yes. Until I know the Americans are the answer to the convoy problem, I need to have an alternate plan.”

“I don’t like it,” Rana complained.

Fleur nodded toward the men walking their way. “They’re coming.”

Rana stood up when she did. “I’ll be going.”

“Thank you for getting word to them.”

“Once again, I will not accept your thanks for doing something that could get you killed.” Rana turned to leave. “They will want money.”

Fleur nodded. “I know.” She watched her friend walk away before turning back to the men who were approaching.

She was still working on getting money into the country and the camp. Sending cash

in the mail was risky, and she doubted smugglers would take a check. Fleur laughed at her thoughts. Yet, she had an idea. She'd sent an email to her cousin in Virginia, who was her point of contact in the States, and was waiting for an answer. It was risky, but hopefully, it would work. Money was essential to getting the people to safety, so it would be worth the chance.

She stood as Ronan and his men approached with fuel containers. Damn, they were strong. There was no way she could lift one of those tanks; they carried one in each hand. Ten tanks. Tears formed in her eyes. "You have no idea what that means to us. We can keep the security lights on and run the clinic and communications generators."

Ronan set his cans down casually. "Lead the way, we'll follow."

She wiped her eyes. "This way." She led them through the maze of paths that had haphazardly developed as survivors moved into camp and built shelters. The first stop was the medical tent. The men filled the generator and left one full container. The container was chained to the generator, which was also chained to a large chunk of buried rock. If anyone wanted the fuel or the generator, they would work for it.

The next stop was the communications tent. The men followed the same process, leaving a full container similarly secured to the generator and anchored. The admin tent was next, followed by the kitchen tent. The last area they reached was the security lighting, which kept the area between the militia and the camp lit.

"Why isn't there security lighting all the way around the camp?" Ronan asked as his men filled the generators.

She glanced up at him. "When you boil it down, it's a matter of money or greed, which is basically money." When Ronan raised his eyebrows questioningly, she sighed and answered, "When we could move people out, we could bring in fuel and

supplies. Since the convoys have been targeted, we've had to pick and choose what's fueled. There's only so much we can do."

He glanced toward where the militia was camped. "And you chose to light this area instead of using the lighting around the other portions of the camp?"

Her lips thinned as she nodded. "Sometimes your help can become your enemy. I don't trust the militia to lift a finger to stop anyone from sneaking into camp."

"Including the militia itself." He finished her thought for her.

"The unaccompanied women and children in this camp are a means to money. That money is very tempting to people who have nothing. There are good men in the militia, and then there are the bastards who exploit a ravaged population." She looked up at him. "Excuse my language, please."

He glanced down with those dark brown eyes and gave her a quick smile. "You have every right to express yourself. Believe me, I've heard worse." He put his hands on his hips. "I'm working with the militia to help move the convoys again, and you've called it correctly regarding the mix of people in that camp. My team and I have set expectations with the new cadre of militia who arrived today. If they want to be paid, they'll toe the line."

"Can you pay them more than they could make by selling information on our convoys? Because I think that's what's happening."

He shook his head. "I don't know. I hope so. Why do you think it's the militia selling the information? Do you give them advance knowledge of the route?"

"No, we don't. They don't know until we pull out of the camp, but the route is obvious once we start because we can only access a few locations that will take our

people.”

“You’ll have to show me how you plan and coordinate the convoys.” Ronan crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at his boot. “Perhaps a change in locations is required.”

“Good luck with that. There are twelve camps here, counting us. Six aren’t within our vehicles’ gas mileage, and three are at capacity and can’t take our people. That leaves three camps where we can relocate the people residing here.”

“There may be another way.” Ronan lifted his eyes to hers.

Her gut tightened. “Like what?”

He moved his gaze to the mountains. “There are tunnels not far from here used to move goods and people.”

She gasped and backed up a step. “You know about the tunnels?”

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He nodded. “It was included in my briefing. Accessing them and keeping the people safe as they traverse the system is insanely complex, especially with the smugglers in the area.” He shook his head. “That’s why we dismissed the idea unless we need to use it as an emergency egress for the staff.”

“An emergency what?” She was trying to keep up, but he was talking in a language she didn’t understand.

“Egress. An emergency exit. We could possibly protect the staff, but the amount of people in this camp—there’s no way.”

She moved forward and put her hand on his arm. Surprised, he looked at her as she almost pleaded, “If we took them in small groups, we could get them out. The question would be where we would come out and how to get them from the end of the tunnel to a safe location in Turkey. That, and how to be absent from the camp from when we left to when we got back without raising concerns or suspicions. The second someone learned about it in camp, the information could be sold, and that would jeopardize the route and the people.” She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth. “So many variables, but it’s a viable option.”

Ronan lifted his hand and put his finger under her chin, lifting her eyes to his. His eyes glimmered with knowledge as he said, “You’ve been planning to use the tunnels, haven’t you.”

His words weren’t a question. They were a statement, and she nodded, and his finger fell from her chin. “I’ve asked one of the ladies in camp to contact her late husband’s coworkers. He was killed trying to bring supplies into Aleppo. When she found out

he was killed and that the faction who'd killed him had identified him, his business partners helped her flee. She ended up here."

Ronan frowned and glanced back toward the camp. "We have contacts that have been vetted, and we trust them. Don't endanger yourself or the occupants of this camp by using people who aren't trustworthy. That's not smart."

The reprimand stung. She blinked at him and then huffed out a humorless laugh. "What isn't smart is leaving all these people here. They came here for help. Our organizations have promised to do that. If we're pulled out, what's going to happen to them? I can tell you what'll happen." She was shaking because she was so mad, but damn it, calling her stupid for looking for alternatives was the straw that broke her back today. Her voice rose as she continued, "Those men will sell any female they can and use the ones they can't. The fathers in this camp will be killed or forced to join the factions along with all boys above the age of eight. Those under the age of eight will be sold for sex or servitude. Their own government turns a blind eye and offers no assistance. Looking away and pretending that isn't happening is what is stupid, sir, not trying to find ways around our current dilemma."

Ronan cocked his head and stared at her, an amused gleam in his eyes. Well, screw him. "I'm sure you can find your way back to your campsite." She spun on her heel, but a solid hand on her shoulder stopped her before she could put one foot forward. His voice was right behind her. "Forgive me for offending you. You should know I've spent years fighting the worst the world offers to protect those with no alternative. Additionally, my little spitfire, I did not say your methods or you were stupid. I said working with people who have not been vetted was not smart. Guardian has resources you do not. Let us determine the best actions to take."

She dropped her head, the feeling of this man's body behind her, warm and strong, and his hand resting on her shoulder sucked every morsel of rebellion from her. She didn't turn around as she apologized. It was easier not to face him. "I'm sorry. It's

been a difficult time. I've been going insane trying to find a way to relocate our people. The tunnels are an option. Too many people have lost their lives trying to get these people relocated to a safe place."

His hand squeezed her shoulder. "I understand where you're coming from."

She turned and didn't try to keep the desperation and anguish out of her voice. "Do you? Really? Have you lost people or known anyone who's been trafficked?" How could he understand unless he'd worked in the camps and seen the complete lack of sufficient help that dashed the hopes and dreams of every person who walked through those camp gates? It wasn't possible.

The kindness in his eyes vanished, and a blank, desolate stare filled his expression. In a natural movement, he tapped his ear before he said. "Yes, I've lost people, one who died in my arms, and yes, my sister was kidnapped and sold to human traffickers. Don't assume you're the only one who's had losses. You aren't. If you'll excuse me, we'll make our way back to our camp." The warmth in his voice was gone. Instead, his answer was clipped and sharp. He strode past her, brushing her shoulder and turning her.

Oh, God. No. She reached out and called after him, "Ronan, wait ...". But he didn't stop, and could she blame him? No, she couldn't. How could she have been so ... judgmental? She had no idea of his past, and the pain he had to have gone through was beyond her comprehension. His sister! Her hands shook as she realized she'd alienated the one source of help that could do something to help them. Even more, she'd brought that pain back to him. If his losses haunted him as much as hers, that pain was raw and bleeding.

Yes, Ronan knew about the tunnels. He knew security and maybe could get the convoys back up and moving safely, but before that he was a man. A man who'd brought help, who was working with her, not against her and she'd put a mile-wide

wedge between them. Damn it. What was she going to do now? She watched as the team headed back to the front of the camp.

“You screwed that one up.”

Fleur jumped at the voice behind her. “Shelly, God, where did you come from?”

“The clinic tent, where I spend my life.” Shelly laughed. “I heard there were some Americans here, and they filled up our generators. I wanted to thank them. I saw you and that big guy and headed this way. I just caught the last bit, but, girl, you’ve got to stop thinking of yourself as the victim in this horrendous mess. You weren’t killed or taken.”

Fleur blinked at the bluntness of Shelly’s words. If her friend had slapped her across the face, she wouldn’t have felt so ...attacked. “Excuse me?”

Shelly pushed her ponytail over her shoulder and put her hands on her hips. “Oh, come on, Fleur, the people who went on those convoys knew the risks. We all do. There’s no guarantee in this part of the world. Yes, it sucks that they were killed. I won’t for a second say it doesn’t, but you are not the martyr in this situation. According to Rana, those guys are here to help us; for God’s sake, let them.”

Fleur’s mouth dropped open. She pointed at herself. “I’m not acting like a martyr.”

Shelly crossed her arms over her chest and stared back at her. “Really? The definition of a martyr is someone who sacrifices something, like your life, for the sake of principle. Tell me, why did you ask Rana to find her contacts? Why did you agree to meet with them?”

Fleur blinked, and her mouth fell open. “Rana told you?”

“Yeah, she did. Rana was worried she was doing something wrong by contacting them, and then when you said you’d meet them, she wanted a sanity check. She doesn’t want to be cast out of the camp for doing what you asked, which is a real possibility.”

“She shouldn’t have said anything. She won’t be penalized for doing what I asked. She shouldn’t have told you anything.” Fleur crossed her arms. She and Shelly had always had a strong friendship, but she was crossing some lines right now.

Not backing down, Shelly came right at her. “But she did, which was smart because someone needs to talk some sense into you.” Shelly shook her head. “I know you think you’re responsible for everyone here because of your position, but you’re no more responsible than Miller, Tom, Louis, or me. We’re all doing a job with the constraints that this fucked up situation has put us in. Yeah, sure, you coordinated the convoys. So, what? Did you sell the information? Did you attack the convoys? Did you kill those people? Did you leave information out so someone could see where you were going? Did you give whoever attacked the convoy guns or ammo? Did you force this country’s government to be the miserable dicks they are? The answer to all those questions is no. Reality, Fleur. Deal with reality, not your perception of what you could have done or could do.”

Softening a bit, Shelly walked toward her. “You couldn’t have done anything more than what you did. You can’t move these people by yourself. Your heart is as big as this country, but you’re not responsible for the wars, the refugees, or the things this country refuses to do for them. Our job is to do the good that we can, no matter how little or how much. Someone should have noticed you were taking all this on your shoulders, but we didn’t. Well, this is me noticing and telling you to stop it. You can’t be everything to everyone, Fleur. You are not responsible.”

Tears filled her eyes as Shelly pulled her into her arms. “Don’t take this on your shoulders, sweetie. Don’t.”

Fleur tried not to cry, but it was game over when Shelly started sniffing. She let the tears roll, and after a few moments of struggling to control herself, she said, “I should’ve been able to do something to stop it from happening.”

Shelly took a hold of her shoulders and pushed her back. “How? Do you have a magic wand? Are you God? Have you been given some omnipotent power to change humanity into something other than what it is?”

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Fleur let out a strangled laugh, slash sob. “No, none of those things.”

“Then you’ve done everything you could do. Don’t be stupid by trying to be a superhero. You’ll end up getting yourself killed, and whoever you take with you could die, too.”

Fleur rolled her eyes. “Thanks.” Shelly was the second person to call her stupid today. Well, sort of ...

Shelly looked at her. “If I were to do what you’re thinking of doing, what would you tell me?”

Fleur stared at her friend. “Not to do it. But I’ve been trained in anti-trafficking.”

“And I’ve been trained to care for people, so by your rationale, I should be the perfect person to take them through the tunnels, right?”

Fleur blinked and then shook her head. “Why are you fighting me with logic? It sucks when I can’t fight back.”

Shelly put her arm around Fleur’s waist. “That’s me, the logical bitch. Now, take me to the nice American men so I can thank them and let them know the clinic is there for them if they ever need us.”

They walked for a few steps before Fleur mentioned, “Oh, I think they have some supplies for you, too.”

“What?” Shelly jumped ahead of her and stopped her from walking. “Why didn’t you say so sooner?”

Fleur held her hands up to shoulder level helplessly. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe you were scolding me for being stupid and making me realize I may be an idiot. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Not a problem. Anytime, and I mean that. Now, get the lead out. I want to see what they brought.” She grabbed Fleur’s hand and pulled her forward at a jog.

“You’re insane,” Fleur said as they trotted down the path.

“Certifiably. Just like you. What other type of person leaves the cushion of their middle-class lives and travels halfway around the world to try to make a difference?” Shelly laughed and jumped over a rope that anchored one of the shelters to the ground. “Come on, Fleur, hurry up!”

Fleur jogged a bit faster to catch up with Shelly. The doctor’s joy matched hers when she learned about the fuel and supplies. She couldn’t blame her, now, could she? And she needed to apologize to Ronan. She’d stepped in it big time with him, and she needed to own up to that—time to eat some crow.

CHAPTER 5

“Well, damn, Skipper, she turned out to be a bit of a bitch, didn’t she?” Stryker asked as Ronan approached the group.

He’d muted his comms before putting the woman in her place then turned them back on as he walked toward his men. He glanced at the group and shut down the idea that Fleur was a bitch. “She’s working in a war zone without having a declared conflict. Her questions weren’t bitchy.”

“Yeah, but she needs to know we’ve all lost someone,” Jug said as he picked up his now empty fuel cans. “Nobody in this business is untouched by what’s happening.”

“She knows now,” Wraith said.

Ronan glanced at his second in command and nodded. “She does. Let’s get back and get the food and medical supplies unlocked and unpacked.”

“For the number of people in this camp, they’ve done a good job keeping up the sanitation,” Wolf said as they moved through the path back toward their camp.

“Skipper, the two vehicles are in Aleppo. It looks like a warehouse area. I’m losing the satellite soon,” Dude said through the comms.

“Copy. Why are you still working?” Ronan didn’t want his man to burn out.

“Meh, Tink had a date. I told her to have fun and that I’d pull a double. She doesn’t get out much.”

“What?” Jug said. “Wait, you checked this guy out, right?”

Dude snorted. “Damn straight. Tink is my little sister, if not by blood, by computer code. The guy works for Guardian, and believe me, I checked him out. He seems like a good guy.”

Ronan chuckled. Dude was their primary operator, but Tink covered his off-duty time. She had the voice of a Smurf and a heart of gold. Everyone on the team was protective of Tink even though they’d never met her. “Get some rest. I’ll send out a tone if we need you.”

“Thanks, Skipper.” Dude yawned. “I’ve got the tone set to break glass on this end. If

you need me, I'll be here.”

Once they'd reached the camp and unlocked the trailer, the team started to pull out the medical supplies, and soon after, Fleur and another woman jogged into camp. Fleur stopped at the edge of their area, but the other woman ran straight to him before looking at the crates they were unloading. “Please tell me you brought these for me?” she asked, looking from him to the others.

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Jug frowned. “Depends on who you are.”

She extended her hand and walked up to Jug. “Dr. Shelly Braun, formerly of Cincinnati, currently from the medical tents. And thank you for the fuel. This is freaking Christmas.”

Jug blinked at the woman but extended his hand anyway. “They’re for you.”

The woman bypassed his hand and hugged Jug like Fleur had hugged Ronan but not as long. Jug’s face turned bright red. The doctor spun, not noticing Jug’s embarrassment, and opened one of the lids. “Oh, yes! Antibiotics, antifungals, antivirals, analgesics, holy crap, vaccines.” She moved to the next crate. “Disinfectants, antiseptics, splints, personal protective gear.” She clapped and opened the last crate. Her moves stilled, and she lifted one of the kits. She looked at the emergency contraception kits and supplies used to handle post-rape care. Lifting her eyes to Jug, she choked out. “Thank you. You have no idea how much we needed all this.”

Jug nodded and gruffed, “Wish it could be more.”

Stryker pointed to a crate. “This is for the kids. It’s candy, but not any candy. Our organization has it made with vitamins and protein. We’re kind of addicted to it.” He lifted the lid, and Fleur walked over to it.

“Taffy?”

“Kind of a tradition for our organization.” Wolf laughed. “Rumor has it one of our

founders is fond of it. It took on a life of its own.” He tossed her a piece and then one to the doctor.

Fleur unwrapped the candy and popped it into her mouth. “Oh, man, this is so good. I haven’t had a sweet in, wow, almost a year.” When she turned and looked at him, her smile faded. She walked over to him. “Could I speak to you a moment? Alone?”

The words were quiet and hidden behind a piece of taffy, but he heard them. He nodded toward the tent, and they walked away from his team.

“Skipper, we’re taking this to the medical tents,” Wraith said as they walked by. He nodded and continued to the large tent, where he opened the flap, and she walked in. He left the flap open but followed her inside.

Turning to him, she held up a finger, and he watched as she finished the taffy. She swallowed hard and said, “Shelly heard the last part of our conversation and pointed out that I’ve had my head up my ... ah, bum and that I’m an idiot.” She crossed her arms and stared up at him. “Due to events that had happened before you got here, I’ve had blinders on, and I’ve been so focused on getting our people out of here and to a camp that can continue to provide for them and protect them that I’ve tuned out everything and everyone else.”

He didn’t need an apology. “Look?—”

She held up a hand as he started to speak. “No, let me finish, please?”

Ronan lifted an eyebrow as he noted the desperate look on her face and nodded. Obviously, the woman needed to get this off her chest.

“I’ve never had anyone die in my arms, and I’m so sorry that has happened to you. Losing people who were coworkers and acquaintances was so damn hard. I can’t

imagine what you went through.” She drew a deep breath. “Your sister, is she ...”

“She’s alive and well. We were able to rescue her from the situation, but it changed life for all of us.”

Fleur’s hand went to her mouth. “Thank God you were able to get to her, and there’s no doubt the experience changed your family. I’ve seen the women and children pulled out of that situation, and that was hard for me. I have no idea what your family has gone through. I hope it brought you closer.”

“Everyone handled it differently, but we’re fine. Thank you.” He and Deacon had dedicated their lives to Guardian because his father’s company had tracked Charley down and rescued her. They’d never wavered on that commitment. Gabby had taken it hard and chosen a path they’d never expected, eventually leading to her working with Charley at the helm of Guardian. A journey he and Deacon were also walking but taking other routes to get there.

“Of course. Anyway, I’m incredibly sorry for assuming my situation and focus was in any way more of a challenge than what you’ve dealt with in your life. It was obnoxiously self-centered of me, and I promise I’ll never do that again.”

He studied her expression. They said eyes were the window to the soul, and he could see nothing but regret for her actions there. Inexplicably, he wanted to make them shine with laughter and happiness rather than regret and pain. “Your apology is accepted but unnecessary. We’re here to find a way to get you, the staff, and, if possible, the occupants of this camp relocated as safely as possible. If we can restart the convoys, we’ll do that. Getting to that point might not happen as soon as you’d like, but I won’t risk anyone: my team, you, your staff, or the people counting on your organization. Understand?”

She nodded. “I do. Could I ask a favor?”

Ronan cocked his head to the side. A favor? His mind instantly bounced to a saying his mom used to say when they were kids. Do you want a kiss to make it all better? And that came from absolutely nowhere. Yeah, not going there. What did she say? Right. “You can ask.” He wasn’t sure he had the means to deliver any favors, but he’d entertain the notion. It seemed he’d entertain a lot of notions about this woman. Oh, for fucks sake, man.

“I’m assuming you’re going to take control of the convoys. Let me learn as you work to provide security.”

Ronan removed his helmet and held it under his arm as he rubbed his head. Well, her mind was firmly in reality, wasn’t it? He cracked his neck and focused. “If we reinstate convoys, you’ll be welcome to observe and provide any input you’ve learned from your time here. I won’t pretend to know everything, and everyone’s observations and input will be evaluated.”

Fleur smiled at him. “Thank you.”

He nodded, noticing the way her smile went all the way to her eyes. “Since the team is delivering supplies, why don’t you show me the process you go through to process a convoy.”

She rubbed her hands together. “Absolutely. Follow me.” She strode out of the tent, and Ronan put his helmet back on. He gave the woman his respect. It took some balls to apologize. Most people wouldn’t. And he’d give her that respect by keeping his mind on the mission.

He’d muted his comms as he worked with Fleur and his team delivered supplies. Ronan sat with Fleur as she explained each step of the process. There were far too many fingers in the act of planning the movement. Over three-quarters of the notifications and checklist items were unnecessary at best and against every security

protocol he'd ever known at worst. Hell, five or six of the tasks she was required to do put the convoy's security in danger.

“Who do you work with in the militia?” he asked as he stared at the pages of checklists spread out before him.

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Fleur leaned back and rolled her shoulders. “Habib has been my point of contact. Miller or a couple of the men go out to their camp and bring him back in when we’re ready to go. We don’t tell them where we’re going.”

“Do you use the same vehicle configuration each time you move people out?”

She shook her head. “No, if we need fuel, we take the fuel trucks and the refrigerator truck if we bring back perishables. Sometimes, it’s just the deuce and a halves that transport people to the other camps. It depends on the needs of the camp and the supplies we can get from the areas we’re going to.”

Ronan leaned back and glanced at her. A deuce and a half was a two-and-a-half-ton truck that carried people in the back under cover. The other vehicles were also readily identifiable at a distance. “So, it’s possible for someone to know what you’re bringing back by the configuration of your convoy.”

She blinked and looked down at the checklist momentarily before swearing bitterly. She looked up at him. “Yes, damn it. They could. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you weren’t trained to do this. You were trained to follow procedures, and you did. You’ve done nothing wrong.” But based on the requirements placed on Fleur and the rest of the staff in the camp, the convoys were set up to fail. He was surprised it hadn’t happened before then. The resources moving out and into the camp were extremely valuable to the factions at war in the country. But he was still missing details. “Tell me, when the convoys were attacked, were they attacked on the way there or back?”

“I’m not sure. I’m sorry. I hate to admit the fact that I singled my focus on the loss of our people and the IDPs.” Fleur stood up, went to an old, dented aluminum filing cabinet, and retrieved a folder.

“May I ask a favor?” He parroted her words from earlier. She stopped with her hand in the drawer. Those blue eyes blinked at him in surprise. Damn, everything the woman thought was expressed through those beautiful eyes.

“Sure. What can I do for you?”

He stared at her. She was amazing, and she needed to recognize that fact. “Stop apologizing. You’ve done a stellar job following your rules and checklists. Nothing you did was out of line or questionable in any way. Devote the energy you’ve been putting into guilt, concern, or worry into helping me help you.” She pulled the file out of the drawer and closed it. He watched her walk back and sit down.

She drew a deep breath. When she looked up at him, there was a glint of tears in her eyes. Every fiber of his being wanted to wipe those tears away and never let her feel this way again. “Guilt. It hurts so damn bad.”

God, he understood that. He’d bought that t-shirt and fucking purchased a hoodie just because he needed to dwell in the guilt a bit more. “Survivor’s guilt. Been there, done that. From experience, I can tell you guilt can place you in dangerous situations. If you let it, it will ruin you. You’re alive. Use that fact to put an end to the people targeting your convoys. Any other focus is a waste of your time.”

Her blue eyes closed for a moment. Her eyelashes rested on her sun-kissed cheeks. She was beautiful, both inside and out. There was zero pretense in this woman. She wore her emotions on her sleeve. “It almost did. Ruin me, I mean. I have a meeting set up outside the camp in three weeks.”

And that was shocking. The idea of a single woman and a foreigner going out of camp unescorted to meet with strangers was sickening. What could happen to her wasn't imaginary or unlikely in any stretch of the imagination. The thought of those dangers crawled under his skin and dug in with bloody claws. He would never allow her to leave the camp unescorted. Never. He narrowed his eyes. "To do what?"

She winced and cringed just a bit like she knew what she was about to say wouldn't fly with him. "The tunnel people, the contacts I told you about, agreed to meet me in three weeks, but they won't come into the camp." She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth, which he figured was her nervous habit.

Ronan leaned forward and got in her personal space. "Promise me you won't go to that meeting."

She blinked, her eyes dropped from his eyes to his lips and then back up. Her cheeks flushed red, and she licked her lips before nodding. "I promise. Shelly had already convinced me I could be doing it for the wrong reasons. It's just that I had to try. Getting these people relocated is so important."

Shelly sounded like she had her head screwed on straight. "What reasons?"

Fleur rolled her eyes. "She said I was trying to be a martyr, which, technically, I think she had the definition wrong, but yeah, I wasn't thinking about anyone except me. I wanted to get people out. I wanted to come up with a solution. Thinking I was the only one trying. But I wasn't, and I'm not. Man, I don't know how I didn't see what I was doing. I mean, everything was centered around me, which I've already apologized to you about."

He leaned back and plucked at the seam of his utility uniform. "Your heart was in the right place."

“Was it?” She sighed and dropped her head to the file on the table with a clunk.

Ronan grimaced. That had to sting. “Did that help?”

“No, it hurt,” the muffled reply said.

Ronan chuckled and smiled when she started laughing, too. Her laugh was amazing.

She lifted her head, and the red spot on her forehead was a testament to the fact that she hadn’t thought that move through. She rubbed the spot and sighed. “I’m really not this much of a putz. Today, you’ve seen me at my worst.”

Ronan smiled and shook his head. “If this is at your worst, you’ve got nothing to worry about. So, how about we look at those convoys and see if we can find a trend?”

She opened the folder and asked, “Do you want to look at all of them or just the ones that were attacked?”

“All of them from the beginning of the year.”

She nodded and started pulling stapled packets of paper off the top of the file. She leaned close to him as he examined each one. “As you can see, we don’t deviate from our checklists.” He made a sound of agreement. She had all the checklists with notification dates, times, and names, plus the names of the people moving to another camp and the supplies returning. Each camp had a designated logistics person she coordinated the moves with. The names didn’t change. He compared the notification names from each NGO and noted several changes within the other organizations. He closed the one he was reviewing. “This will take days.”

“What are we looking for? Maybe I can help.” Her ponytail slipped over her shoulder and landed on his arm. The soft braid surprised him. He glanced down, and she

grabbed it. “Sorry.” He lifted an eyebrow and looked at her. Glancing up at him, she blushed. “I know. Stop apologizing.”

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He chuckled. The attraction he was feeling to this woman was a bit overboard, but it was the passion she had for what she did that seemed to link his thoughts to her. He knew that feeling. When you were positive that what you were doing was making the world better. It was an addictive feeling, and so few people in the world actually found work they were passionate about. “Thank you, and to answer your question, I’m looking for anything in the convoys to denote a change. Personnel, processes, anything and everything down to the day of the week and when the convoys left or returned. How long have you worked with Habib?” They’d have to process each of these convoys and compare them.

“Whew, that’s a lot to look at, but I’m game. Habib has been the leader of the militia here for almost eight months.” She tapped the end of her pen against the table. “If I had to put him in the good guy or bad guy pile, he’d go in the good guy stack.”

“Why’s that?”

“Since he’s been here, the amount of poaching from the camp has lessened.” She glanced up at him.

“Poaching?”

“Things going missing, people going missing. We can’t stop people from leaving the camp, and they can leave at any time, but when unattached females or boys over the age of eight go missing in the middle of the night, you have to ask if they left or were taken.” She shrugged. “I believe the last leader allowed his people to steal from us. The instances of that have diminished since Habib took over.”

Ronan hated the acceptance she had in her voice. What she must have seen in her time here was daunting. She had a heart of gold, but he could tell that the realities of the world had started to hammer a few dents into it. “How do you know people go missing?” Roll call wasn't an option with all the people in the camp.

“Others tell us they haven't seen someone in days or weeks.” She sighed. “Knowing who's in the camp isn't an exact science here, but I work hard to register all the unaccompanied and the children. Besides me, we have volunteers who help them with food, teaching them how to keep things sanitary, finding them space, and taking them to the hospital tent when necessary, but there are only so many of us to go around. The theft is usually fuel, food, generators, and such. We've learned to secure anything we don't want to disappear.”

“I'll meet with Habib tomorrow.” He wanted to get the man's perspective. “Has he lost people while protecting the convoys?”

Fleur blinked then shook her head. “I don't know. I've never heard of any of the militia being hurt, but again, I haven't asked. That makes me horrible, doesn't it?” She dropped her head to her hands.

“No, it doesn't. You can't be all things to all people.”

She turned her head and looked at him. “My martyr complex is showing, isn't it?”

He shrugged and winked at her. “Could be.”

Groaning, she asked, “Can I be there to hear what Habib says? I'll know if he's telling you the truth or not.”

He had no desire to take her out of the camp or into the militia's area, especially with Slim and his counterparts being there. If Habib were still in command, which he

doubted, the man wouldn't want to talk to them with a woman present. Working for a woman was deemed to be beneath a man in this part of the country. "I'll have Miller bring him into the camp. There's a divider in our tent. You can listen from the other side."

Fleur frowned at him. "Because I'm a woman?"

"Yes. His beliefs and culture, not mine." Ronan watched her internalize what he said.

"I know." She sighed and slumped in her chair. "Archaic thinking."

"I agree, but we'll work within our limits. Making him comfortable could loosen his tongue. But there's a real possibility Habib is no longer controlling the militia."

She popped upright. "What? Why? We haven't heard anything, and we have a great grapevine."

"Gossip?"

She made a face at him. "Well, that, too, but the informal information about what's happening in the camp is important, too."

Damn, this woman was unexpected but a welcome addition to his mission. He leaned in. "The men who came with us this morning were led by someone who thought very highly of himself. Two vehicles left shortly after that. He could've been relieved of his duties."

She frowned and shook her head. "That's not good. I need to let Miller know we might have a new point of contact." When she rubbed her neck, he glanced at his watch. They'd been at this for hours.

He stood up and slung his weapon over his shoulder. “I’ll let you do that and get some dinner.”

She chuckled and stood up, dropping her pen on the table before replacing the documents in the folder and putting them in the filing cabinet. “Most days, I eat one meal a day. I don’t think it’s right of me to eat when the IDPs are hungry.”

Well, that explained why she was so slender. “Have you eaten today?”

She cocked her head as if thinking. She smiled suddenly. “Yes, I had a piece of candy.”

Ronan put his hands on his hips. “Come on, you can have dinner with me.”

“No, I wouldn’t want to take your food from you.”

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He looked back at her. “I think you failed to realize that wasn’t an invitation.”

She snorted. “I don’t take orders from you.”

Ronan saw the challenge in her expression. Well, okay, he was up to it. She smiled and lifted an eyebrow at him, adding to the fun. He smiled as he said, “You do. I’m in charge of security for this camp now. You’ll do as I say when I say it.” He was damned if he was going to eat while she was hungry.

She crossed her arms and stared at him, defiance flashing in every cell of her body. “In security matters, yes. In this, no.”

“Buchanan, I’m giving you one opportunity to change your mind.”

“No.” She shook her head, smiling wickedly. Putting on his helmet, he walked forward and dipped down before slinging her over the shoulder that was not carrying his M-4.

“What are you doing? Stop! You can’t do this!” she shrieked, and then a bubble of laughter belted out across the tent.

“I am doing this. You had your opportunity.” He ducked through the opening of the tent that was connected to Miller’s.

“I’m serious! Stop and put me down.” Her laughter took away any severity of the protest. Ronan laughed when she snorted and then laughed harder. Ronan saw Miller push the flap of his tent back. His look of worry turned to surprise and then to humor.

“Miller! Tell him to put me down. Oh my God, I’m going to get altitude sickness up here.”

“Which leads to the question, why are you up there, Fleur?” Miller asked, laughing with them now.

“She failed to follow an order,” Ronan provided.

She squeaked and grabbed at the back of his uniform. Her laughter peeled across the camp, and they attracted more eyes as she laughed. “He can’t order me to eat. Tell him to put me down.”

“I can when she hasn’t eaten today. I’m taking her to dinner.”

“Buchanan, I told you to take better care of yourself,” Miller fussed at her in mock sternness. Ronan jostled her to carry over his shoulder more easily, and her laughter grew louder. “Enjoy dinner, Buchanan,” Miller called after them.

“I’m going to report this, Ronan.” Her threat was lost in her giggles.

Ronan spun her around. “To whom?” he asked. “I don’t see anyone here.”

She shrieked and laughed harder. “To my supervisors.” The words were barely recognizable. She went limp and dropped over his back, still laughing. He had to hurry to pin her legs so she wouldn’t face-plant in the dirt. His laughter and hers mixed as he made his way to their tent.

“Whatcha got there, Skipper?” Wolf asked from the darkness outside the camp.

“A dinner guest,” he said, and she let out a laugh.

“A brute has kidnapped me. You should help me.”

Wolf laughed. “Nah, I think the Skipper has things handled.”

“Brat.” She pushed up. “Hey, where did he go?” He could feel her twisting to look for Wolf. “Man, he’s good at disappearing, isn’t he?”

“One of the best,” Ronan agreed.

“Which one was that?” she asked, still trying to lift herself by holding onto his uniform.

“Wolf,” he answered, chuckling as he dropped her on her feet when he entered the tent. Jug and Wraith looked up when they entered.

“Whew!” She put out an arm, and he grabbed it to steady her. “I’m slightly dizzy.”

“Because you haven’t eaten,” Ronan said.

“Or it could be that I was tossed over an ogre’s shoulder and dragged out of my tent,” she said.

“Is that possible?” Jug asked. “Being tossed over a shoulder and dragged?”

Wraith chuckled. “Nope.” He stood up and grabbed his weapon. “Jug.”

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“Coming,” Jug said, grabbing his weapon. “We’re going to check the perimeter and stop at the hospital to ensure they secured the supplies. They don’t have the best containers over there, so we thought we’d help if they needed it.”

“Copy that,” Ronan said as he hit up their supply kit, and his men left. “What do you want for dinner?” He grabbed two MREs. “Beef stew or chili.” He held up the pouches.

“Wow, first-class dining over here.” She cocked her head and shrugged. “Surprise me.”

“Chili is better.” He tossed it to her, and she caught it. “Do you know how to warm it up?”

She nodded. “Yep. One of the first things I learned when I joined this organization. I wasn’t joking, you know. This is first-class dining. We’ve been rationing for a long time. What I wouldn’t give to get these kids some fruits and veggies.”

Ronan pointed to his bunk. “You can sit there.” He sat on the ground beside her. Pulling the cup off his canteen, he filled it with water and handed it to her. “Thank you. Not only for the food but for the fun. I haven’t laughed that much in a long time.” She pulled her food out of the pouch.

“I can understand that.” He chuckled. “I wasn’t going to carry you over here. I was just proving a point, but when you laughed so hard ...” He smiled when she laughed again.

She shook her head and slid her food into the heater she'd activated with water. "How long have you worked for Guardian?"

"Twelve years." Ronan shrugged. "Most of my family works for them in some fashion."

"Really?" she asked as she fought with the cornbread pouch. Sighing, she looked at him. "The cornbread is fighting me."

He smiled and extended his hand, and she passed it over. He slipped his knife out of his web belt and slit it open. "You got a big knife there, Skipper." He lifted his eyes to hers and saw the laughter she was trying to suppress. "If I knew you better, I would ask if you were compensating for something."

Her audacity shocked him, and he barked out a laugh. "If I knew you better, I'd tell you I don't have to compensate for anything."

When he answered her, she had just put a bite of cornbread into her mouth. When she laughed, cornbread crumbs spewed. She clamped her hands over her mouth, causing them both to laugh. Ronan ended up leaning against Wraith's bed, holding his stomach. When they finally quieted down, she sighed. "I missed this."

"Laughing?" he asked.

"Being normal." She was lying half on his cot with her feet still on the floor. "I love what I do, but sometimes, I think I've lost me in the process."

He glanced over at her. "That would be a shame. I kind of like you."

She turned her head to him. "Right back at you, Skipper."

CHAPTER 6

Fleur put what was left of her MRE food into the larger pouch and rolled the top. She'd eat the crackers tomorrow. That would mean one full day of rations that could go to someone else. "Thank you for dinner," she said as he stood and slung his weapon back on his shoulder.

"Anytime, and I mean that. We have enough, and we can get more."

"How?" she asked as she stepped out of the tent into the darkness.

He shrugged. "We have resources you don't. Guardian takes care of its people."

"You said earlier most of your family works for the organization. What do they do?"

"Well, my dad is retired. He was a founder of the organization. My aunts and uncles work for the organization as well in different capacities. Then there are my sisters who work in headquarters. They're both married to people who work for Guardian, too."

Fleur swung her pouch of food as they walked. "Sisters? Including the one who was taken?"

He nodded. "She's the most determined person on earth. I have no idea how her husband deals with her." He chuckled. "She's amazing."

Fleur heard the admiration in his voice and smiled in the darkness. He was a family man, which she appreciated, although she couldn't tell anyone why it did. "That makes Guardian a family affair, doesn't it?"

"Especially since my brother Deacon runs a team, too."

“There are two like you working at Guardian?” Laughing and having fun was so easy around this man.

“There’s only one of me.” He chuckled. “Deacon is very much his own person, as am I.”

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“This is me.” She pointed at a small two-person tent behind the big tent where she worked.

“Where are all of your belongings?” He frowned. There was hardly any room in the tent.

“In the admin tent in the trunk under the conference room table. I have room enough for a change of clothes and my sleeping cot here. I have some books and a lantern. It’s battery-operated and rechargeable. Plus, I can zip this flap. Less creepy crawlies that way.”

“And where’s your tent? Because it looks like it was sent to you from a camping store.”

She shrugged. “It was. My cousin sent it to me. I didn’t need all that room. We put homemade bunk beds in it and provide beds for twenty children.”

Ronan crossed his arms over his chest. “Not many people would do that.”

“Wrong.” She laughed. “I did it. Shelly sleeps in the medical tent and gave up her tent for the same reason. Louis sleeps in the camp’s communications tent and gave his up, too.”

Ronan smiled at her. “I stand corrected.”

Fleur grabbed at her heart. “Oh, a man who admits when he’s wrong. Be still, my heart.”

He chuckled and shook his head. "I enjoyed tonight. What time can you meet tomorrow to go over those reports?"

"Ah, I have to help Shelly with the clinic line in the morning. I'll be back as soon as that's done. But you have access to the documents. You saw where they were filed, right?"

"I did."

"Then just make yourself at home. Earl Adams and Louis Halstead were the only people working in the tent with me. Both are on loan to other sections because convoys have been stopped. Earl works with sanitation, and Louis is helping out with repairs and works in the administration tent when he can."

"I'll do that after I talk to Habib."

"Oh, that's right." She slapped her head with her hand. "I forgot. I'll see if someone else can cover for me on the clinic line."

"It would be better if you weren't present." Ronan held up a hand when she started to object. "Simply because I can meet with him on his ground in his camp."

"You're going to go into the militia camp?" She shook her head. "Remember when I said you were the complete package? I retract that. Brains are required to be that, and you're obviously missing a few."

Ronan tossed his head back and laughed. The deep, throaty boom surrounded her, and she smiled at him. Their sense of humor melded so well. "I won't be going alone or unarmed."

She put her hands on her hips and stared up at him. "Well, that would change things."

“I’ve worked with factions of militia throughout the world. They respect money and power. Guardian has both.”

“But there are only five of you and over seventy or so of them.”

Ronan chuckled. “That makes it an unfair fight. We’ll have the advantage.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not full of yourself, are you?”

“Nope. I just know the capabilities of my team. Good night, Fleur. I’ll see you after you get done at the clinic.”

“Good night, and thank you for dinner. I admit I was hungry.” She lifted the remains of her dinner.

“The invitation stands, and I mean that.”

“Thank you.” She watched as he walked back toward his camp then unzipped the small tent, stooped to go in, and turned on the battery-operated light. After zipping herself in, she took off her boots and sighed, wiggling her toes. The freedom of not wearing boots was simple but one she enjoyed. She slept in the clothes she wore and would shower and change her clothes in the morning. The light blanket she had wouldn’t be used except as protection for her cot. She pulled the rubber band off the bottom of her ponytail and unbraided her hair. Her one luxury was her brush—real boar bristles with a mahogany handle. She closed her eyes and brushed her hair, starting at the bottom and working her way up.

“Knock, knock.” Shelly’s voice came from outside her tent.

“Come on in.”

Shelly unzipped the flap and stooped in. After zipping up the flap, she sat on the end of Fleur's cot. "Okay, I'm insane. Tell me I'm insane."

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“Not only are you insane, but you’re bat-shit crazy, but why am I telling you?” Fleur asked.

“I’m thirty-five years old. I’m not a teenager.” Shelly dropped her head to her hands. “But I think I have a crush on one of the Guardians.”

“Oh, is that all?” Fleur snorted. “Join the club, girl.”

Shelly’s head snapped up. “Who, and please don’t say Jug.”

“Ronan.” She winked at Shelly. “Jug is a really big guy. I thought you went for the more metrosexual type.”

“Who says that anymore?” Shelly rolled her eyes heavenward. “Cultured. I preferred a cultured man. Or I thought I did.”

“Well, obviously, I say it.” Fleur started brushing her hair again before she smiled and nudged Shelly with her toe. “So, Jug?”

Shelly nodded and shared with a small smile, “He’s got a hard shell, but I think that’s protecting his soft center.”

“Why do you say that?” She worked her hair as she talked to Shelly.

“Because he was all gruff and demanding, making changes to the way we stored the high theft items and fussing like crazy, but when one of the kids came up with a cut on his hand, Jug lifted him up onto his lap, gave him a piece of candy, got him to stop

crying, and kept his attention while I cleaned the cut and bandaged him up.”

“And that went straight to your heart, didn’t it?” Fleur said knowingly.

“On an exploding rocket. Big, handsome, bossy, and he’s good with kids. I think my panties exploded.” Fleur laughed at her friend as she fanned herself with her hands.

“Tell me about Ronan. Isn’t he the one who put you in your place this afternoon?”

“He is. But I apologized and realized you were right.”

“Hold the presses, Fleur Buchanan took my advice to heart? I’m going to faint.” Shelly dropped to the cot, her head landing in Fleur’s lap. Fleur flopped her hair on Shelly’s face. The woman made sounds like she was choking and fought her way through Fleur’s mane to sit back up. “Okay, fainting spell over. Spill.”

Fleur stopped brushing her hair and stared at the bristles of her brush. “I told him the truth, that I was trying to find a way to take people out of the camp and that maybe you were right, and I was being selfish. Actually, I realized I’d been self-centered. Everything was based on what I could do without asking what others were doing or what I could do to help them. I think it was a way to deal with survivor’s guilt.” What Ronan had said rung true. “I’ll tell Rana I won’t meet with her contacts.”

“Oh, thank God, but don’t distract me with my smartness. Ronan, huh?” She lifted her eyebrows a couple of times.

“Yeah, girl, he makes me laugh and gets my sense of humor. Plus, damn. He’s sexy. That chiseled jaw, those muscles, dark brown eyes, and his voice. God, that deep baritone vibrates through me. So, if you’re insane, you can move over, and I’ll join you on the ride.”

“Maybe we’ve been over here too long.” Shelly closed one eye and looked at her.

They both said, “Nah,” at the same time and laughed.

“I’ll get out of your hair,” Shelly said. “You’re working with me tomorrow morning, right?”

“I’ll be there.” Fleur watched her friend leave and then finished brushing her hair. She wasn’t insane. She was attracted to Ronan but knew the man was only there until the camp was shuttered in about two months. Plus, the camp had zero privacy, so her crush had no chance of going anywhere. But for the next two months, she’d have someone with whom she could laugh, work, and hang out with. That made her smile as she braided her hair again and turned out the light in her tent.

Ronan was a handsome puzzle of masculinity. He had a passion for taking care of people. She could tell even though he hadn’t said those words ... exactly. The way he talked with her, his insightful questions, the concern he had for the IDPs, the staff, and his team was a glaring part of his personality. That and his sense of humor. She’d shown him her worst and been an absolute putz more than once and instead of distance and disgust, he’d shown her grace and goodness. That was almost sexier than the man was. She’d never run into a man like him before. He was a strength she didn’t know she needed. She was tired of being strong, and that realization hurt a bit. But Ronan was someone she could lean on. She knew it but couldn’t explain it.

She listened to insect night songs and the small sounds of people moving around the camp. For the first time in a long time, her mind wasn’t chasing problems; rather, she fell asleep thinking of the tall, muscled, sexy man with a deep voice and wonderful laugh.

Fleur brought the last patient into the medical tent. The morning sick call included a variety of bumps, bruises, cuts, and returns to remove stitches. Several younger kids had a fever, which was always a concern. Shelly had a translator question them about where they’d been and what they’d eaten and drank. The common denominator was a

stew that one of the older girls had cooked using too old meat. Food poisoning was bad, but not as bad as a contagious bug. As the last person left, Rana arrived from the admin tent with a young woman. “Dr. Shelly, Adara is new here. She needs your help.”

Fleur knew immediately what that meant. “I’ll put the sign up outside.”

“Thank you,” Shelly said as she removed her gloves and smiled at the new camp resident. She asked Rana, “Did you explain what was going to happen?”

“I did.”

That was the last Fleur heard. She closed the medical tent flap and dragged the sign in front. The sign said “Do Not Enter” in three different languages. If an emergency happened, the sign would give Shelly enough time to stop the exam before she responded.

Fleur walked back to the other side of the camp and heard the Jeep before she saw it. Ronan and two of his men drove back into the camp. Jug stood up, manning the huge machine gun mounted to the vehicle's frame. Men inside the camp would normally worry her, but not these men.

She watched the Jeep park before stepping into the tent she used as an office. The file she’d put away last night was spread out on the table, and one of Ronan’s men was reading through a report. He looked up as she came in. Nodding his head, he went back to the report. “Hi. I’m Fleur. I’m not sure I remember your name.”

“Wraith,” he said but continued to focus on the report.

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“Is there anything I can do to help?” She moved over to the table, which was just a board on top of boxes.

He handed her a stack of reports. “Need to know what day they were attacked.”

“Date or day of the week?”

“Both.”

“Got it.” The man didn’t mince words, did he? Well, that was okay. She could be quiet, too. She reached for a tablet and pen and went to work. By the time Ronan entered the tent, she and Wraith had found a pattern. Each of the convoys was attacked on a Tuesday. There was no trend as to going or coming back, nor was there any correlation with which of the three camps they used.

“What do you have?”

“You were right. It’s the day of the week,” Wraith said. “Tuesdays.”

Ronan nodded and touched his ear. “Dude.” He smiled. “Thanks for that information, but I just talked to him at the militia camp. All the convoys were hit on Tuesdays.”

She leaned over and whispered, “Is he talking to someone, or has he gone off the deep end?”

Wraith smiled. “He’s talking to our operator.”

“Like telephone operator?”

“Like computer systems,” Ronan said.

“Oh.” She narrowed her eyes. “I still can’t see a radio.”

“You’re not supposed to,” Wraith said.

“Huh.” Fleur stopped and looked at Wraith. “Why not?”

“Tactical advantage,” Ronan answered.

She frowned at Ronan. “I thought you were talking to the dude.”

“Just Dude,” Wraith replied.

“Okay.” She looked at Ronan. “Are you done?”

Ronan smiled. “For now. He’s doing some research.”

“On what?”

“On whom has access to satellite information on Tuesdays that would feed the militia the information on your convoys.”

Fleur frowned. Thinking about satellites wasn’t in her wheelhouse. She shrugged and suggested, “Maybe it’s only above us once a week?”

Wraith smiled, and Ronan chuckled. “Not the way it works. Depending on the orbit, satellites circle the Earth once every twelve hours.”

She frowned. "I didn't know that. How will he find out which satellite was used?"

Ronan shrugged. "Something about narrowing down what satellite was in the area during the time frame of the convoys and then searching out who had access. From there, it's a matter of communications to personnel in this area."

Fleur let her jaw drop open. "What? He has access to that information?"

Wraith put down his papers, tapped his ear, and said, "On my way."

"Who was he talking to?"

"Stryker," Ronan said, sitting in the chair Wraith had vacated. "Our operators have access to information most don't."

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“Why?” Fascinated, Fleur leaned over to look in Ronan’s ear. The tiniest earbud in all of creation was nestled inside. “That’s how you hear him?” Ronan nodded. “How do you talk to him? Where’s the mic?”

Ronan smiled. “Trade secret. If I told you, I’d have to?—”

“Kill me. I know, I know.”

“God, no. I’d have to get you to sign an NDA, and I’m fresh out of those.”

She blinked and then laughed at him. “You’re the most unexpected man.”

“Glad I can keep you amused.”

“You do,” she said and pointed at the papers. “Are we done with these?”

“Not quite. Do you have duty schedules on who works the communications tent on Tuesdays?”

She felt the smile slip off her face. “I can get them from Miller.”

“Ask him for that and something else. I don’t want to tip our hand.”

Her gut dropped. “Why? Do you think he’s involved?”

“No.” Ronan shook his head. “But if you were asked for that information and you knew the person asking was working on the convoy issue, would you do some

snooping of your own?"

Fleur nodded. "I would. So would Miller." She sighed and tapped the top of the table with her pen. "I can ask for duty rosters from admin, communications, and kitchen areas."

"Perfect. Since the beginning of the year, please." Ronan pulled the reports toward him. "Now that we know which day to focus on, we can look for other similarities."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Ronan nodded as she stood up. "I'll be here."

Fleur walked next door and called at the flap. "Miller, okay to enter?"

"Sure, come on in." Miller had a fan on his desk, and the air moved comfortably around the small tent. "What can I do for you?"

"The Guardian people want the duty rosters for admin, communications, and the kitchen area since the beginning of the year."

"There in the filing cabinet." He pointed behind her. "Under duty rosters, but why would they want them?"

"I can honestly say they are leaving no stone unturned." She blew out a breath of air. "Details, details, details." Which was the truth.

Miller chuckled. "Well, at least they're trying. I hope they find something soon. Maybe we can relocate most of these people before we have to bug out."

"I hope so, too." Fleur grabbed the files. "I'll have these back to you as soon as

they're done."

"Sounds good," Miller said distractedly, working on whatever was before him.

Fleur exited his tent and went back into hers. "Here you go." She put the file for the communications tent in front of Ronan.

"All right. We need to find out who works on Tuesdays." Ronan grabbed half the stack and handed her the other half. He stopped and looked up at her. "Unless you have something else you need to do?"

She shook her head. "There are over a hundred staff members in camp. Only three of us work on convoys now." There used to be six. Two other sections had lost two people each. She lowered her eyes to the rosters.

When Ronan tapped her foot with his boot, she lifted her gaze. His deep voice promised, "We'll find out how this happened and who's responsible."

She smiled sadly. "It's still raw. Does it ever get easier?"

"Eventually, the pain dulls. For me, the memories are just as sharp as the day it happened, but the emotions are ... contained."

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She nodded and turned back to the rosters. When she received each notification, she knew exactly where she was and what she was doing. The pain, the agony of anger, guilt, and rage at the treachery—every emotion was sharp and vicious and drew psychological blood. Did she want the pain to ebb? Yes. Would it? She glanced at Ronan. She hoped it would.

CHAPTER 7

Ronan knew the pain Fleur was going through, and although he wanted to help her get through the emotional pit she was in, all he could do was be there for her. He could be the one to hold her hand as she worked through it. Damn, there he went again, picturing them as a unit. It was a concept he'd never bounced around his head before. But with this woman, he couldn't seem to shake the idea that he was supposed to be the hand she held. He was glad no one could read his thoughts. He was thinking in flowers and hearts, and he wasn't a flowers or hearts type of guy. What the hell had infected him? She had. Obviously. He mentally rolled his eyes.

True, he wasn't a doctor by any stretch of the imagination, and his brother Deacon had always told him his empathy tank was usually empty. It wasn't now. Especially around her. He was guarded, true. But that worked for him. For him to truly care, he had to know people. He had his team and his extended family. Strangers were usually held at arm's length. Fleur was an obvious exception. Something about her just clicked with him, and yeah, he'd crumbled her assumptions that she was the only one who'd suffered or known people who'd been through hell. But to the woman's credit, she'd screwed her head on straight and showed up. That single factor told him all he needed to know about her. He'd found that people rarely took responsibility for their actions, offenses, and assumptions by flinging blame and making themselves victims.

Fleur realized what she was doing and stopped that shit.

He was impressed with her resilience, which was needed to get through the cluster-fuck of an assignment she was currently working. Not many people would.

“There’s a drawdown here.” He motioned to the rosters he was looking at.

“Yes, we were scheduled to downsize and eventually close. We’ve gone from over ten thousand IDPs to just over four thousand. We moved six thousand people to new camps or into Turkey and through other agencies to countries willing to take them.”

“How long would it take you to move four thousand?”

“Depending on the vehicles we could use and how fast we coordinated their movement ...”

He watched as she rolled her bottom lip with her teeth and thought. “Running concurrent convoys with one out and one in, I could get them out in two months, but that would be pushing it. And we don’t have the resources.”

He leaned forward. “What would you need to do that?”

“Ha. Well, more vehicles, drivers, fuel, and some way to contact international organizations willing to help take in the people we can’t place in the other IDP camps.”

If they could determine where the intel was coming from, they could get the vehicles and supplies through Al-Tanf Garrison. The long pole in that tent was figuring out how these particular convoys were targeted if they’d been moving people for over a year. But maybe it wasn’t the “how” they should be looking for. Perhaps they should also look for the “why.”

“The convoys you were moving this year, were they comprised differently?”

“Comprised? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Did you change how many people you moved?”

She shook her head. “Always the same amount of people. Between two and three hundred, depending on status. Families take up more room. They have a few possessions, which takes away seating for others.”

“No changes. Okay, I’ll toss that idea.”

“Which was?” she asked as she wrote names on her tablet.

“Maybe they were targeted because of who you were moving.”

She looked up at him and shook her head. “It is always a mix between families and unattended women and children.”

He leaned back and stared at the duty rosters. He tapped his ear. “Dude, you there?”

“No, it’s me, Tink. Dude is offline chasing satellite intel. What can I do for you, Skipper?” Tink’s Smurf-like voice made him smile.

“Hey, Tink, how was the date?”

“Did Dude tell you guys?”

“Yes,” Wraith said in his low growl.

“I’m going to slap that man silly.” Tink huffed. “I had a wonderful time, and he was a

perfect gentleman. Now, can I help you with something?”

Ronan chuckled. “Just make sure he stays a gentleman, and we won’t have any problems. But to answer your question, I need you to check on something for me. Has there been a shift in the events in-country in the last seven or eight months?”

“Political, economic, status of fighting between factions, those types of things?” Tink asked as she typed.

“Roger that,” Ronan confirmed.

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“Give me some time. The government there isn’t forthcoming about things that happen within their border. I’ll have to use secondary reports and draw conclusions based on what isn’t happening.”

“You’ve got time, Tink. I’m working a hunch.”

“I’ll get you the report as soon as I can. Anything else?”

“No. That’s it for now. I’m clear.” He tapped the mute button on his comm device.

He glanced at Fleur and jerked back. She was right next to him, staring at his uniform. “Where the heck is your microphone?” She moved his collar.

Laughing, he batted at her hands. “Get off me, woman.”

She sat back and narrowed her eyes. “Bet you don’t say that very often, do you?”

It took him a second to catch her drift. He threw back his head and laughed. “That would assume I have a woman around, which I don’t.”

She straightened suddenly. “A boyfriend or husband, then?”

He shook his head. “I’m not gay, not married, and don’t have a girlfriend.”

A huge smile spread across her face. “Oh, dang, so sorry to hear that.”

He rolled his eyes. “You, Ms. Buchanan, are trouble.”

She shrugged and turned back to her stack of papers. "I have a feeling you know how to handle trouble."

Oh, he did, and he'd have no problem handling her. "I'm very adept."

She glanced over at him and gave him a long up-and-down look. "I'm sure you are."

Wraith came over the comms. "Skipper, I've handed out assignments. Checking on militia posts. Introducing myself."

Ronan tapped his ear. "Copy that."

"Back to work." He nodded at her pile of papers.

"Killjoy, " she said under her breath then returned to her tasks. He chuckled, wrote down the names of the people working in the comm center on Tuesday, and flipped to the next page. As it stood now, he'd split his team into shifts. Wolf and Stryker were on ten at night to six in the morning. Jug was on the swing shift, working from three to eleven, and he and Wraith worked the day shift.

He glanced at his sheet and noticed one name consistently worked on Tuesday. Adil Abdo. He leaned over and looked at Fleur's list. "Adil," he said out loud.

"It can't be him. He's worked with us since I've been here. He's a local national who lives south of here, and he has a clearance. That's why he works in the comms tent." She put her pen down and rubbed her eyes. "It can't be him. He works five days a week, so it makes sense that he would work the same days."

"I'm not saying he did anything wrong. We're just gathering intel at this point." Ronan leaned back and tapped his ear again. "Tink?"

“Yes, sir?” she answered immediately.

“Please give me all the information you can on a local national, Adil Abdo. He works here at the IDP camp and has a clearance.”

“Ah ...” Tink hesitated and then spelled the man’s name. “Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And he has a foreign national clearance?” she asked.

He cocked his head. “Yes, he does. Tink, what’s up?”

“His file is flagged. Any questions have to go through Alpha. If this is an emergency, I can wake him up.”

“No. It's not an emergency. Put a message through to him that I need to speak to him about the guy.”

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“Will do, and thank you for not making me wake him up.”

“He isn’t cranky, is he?” He’d give his uncle all kinds of shit for being pissy to his operator.

“Oh, no, but once I called ... someone ... in the middle of the night, and they were obviously in the middle of something.”

Ronan laughed. “Tell me who, Tink. I have to know.”

“No, sir. I will not. That will go to my grave with me. I was mortified.”

Ronan laughed again. “All right, I won’t push. That’s all I need.”

“Yes, sir. The message has been sent. I’m clear.”

He touched his ear again and looked over at Fleur, who was scanning the front of his uniform. “Still looking for a microphone?”

She lifted her eyebrows and nodded. “I’ll find it. It’s kind of a personal challenge at this point. What did they say about Adil?”

“His file is flagged, and I need to talk to my superior if I want information.”

“Is that bad?”

Ronan shook his head. “No. It could mean any number of things. None of which I’m

worried about in the slightest.” Most likely, he’d interacted with Guardian and was protected in some fashion. “If he’s a problem, that information would have been relayed immediately.”

He saw her relief. “I’m glad. He’s a nice kid.”

“Kid?” And that was surprising.

“Guy. For some reason, he strikes me as young, but I suck at ages.” She shrugged her shoulder.

“If I wasn’t here, what would you do now?” Ronan collected his half of the duty rosters.

“There’s always something to do. I go shelter to shelter to make sure everyone has been registered through the admin tent. We have some resources we can give the ones coming out of abuse. Tammara, the camp counselor, will talk with them about coping and how to deal. For those who’re pregnant, we try to identify them and help. We can provide vitamins and possibly extra rations. We try desperately to keep track of everyone, but as I said before, people come and go. We can’t hold them here against their will.”

“Have you ever left the camp to retrieve people in trouble?” He knew she had. When she’d first arrived in the country, she was reprimanded for going close to the conflict zone and removing innocents in the area. That was included in his file on her.

She groaned. “Yes. But believe me, I won’t do that again. I came this close to losing my job after being here for less than a week.” She pinched her fingers together. “But I won’t apologize for what I did. We were able to get sixty people out of the area.”

What she didn’t tell him was that the traffickers had caught her, and if it weren’t for a

bombing barrage, she probably wouldn't be alive. That incident had allowed her to escape. His report on Fleur was extensive. All the Americans who worked at this camp had files, and he had to open his phone and tab in the name for it to come up. Each of his men had the information. None of them were in the dark. Knowledge was power, and shared knowledge was a tactical advantage when working as a team.

“So, your primary mission is ...” He wanted to understand what it was she did.

“Anti-trafficking. I make sure the people we register with us are accounted for, and if they're transported to another IDP camp, their paperwork follows them.” She stood up and walked over to her bookshelf where binder after binder lined the wooden structure. She took one down. “Each page is a person.” She flipped the paper and sighed. “The ones with the red ‘X’”—she showed him the page she was looking at—“are people who have left us. The ones who are highlighted disappeared without letting us know they were going. The ones with the red square by their name were lost during convoys. Some died during childbirth. Too young for their bodies to be able to deliver. Some died because of wounds sustained as they fled. Others come in and stayed and never left. Well, until we were told our camp would be closed. A lack of funding is what they said.” She closed the book softly and put it back on the shelf. “I keep records of all of them. The gaining camp gets a copy of these, not the original.”

She sighed and leaned against the main post in the tent. “I've arranged for emergency transportation of people out of conflict areas.” She rolled her eyes. “The right way, and I sent convoys to pick them up. But lately, there hasn't been anyone informing us where the conflict is brewing or if any people need emergency evacuation. I was told I would work with local partners to coordinate rescue operations that targeted traffickers. That's never happened.” She pulled her thick braid over her shoulder and played with it as she looked out the hazy plastic window. “I was so ready to make a difference when I accepted this job.”

Ronan stood and walked over to her. He once again put his finger under her chin, directing her eyes up to him, and no, he wouldn't stop touching her. She was soft, beautiful, and had a heart as big as this fucking conflict. Unfortunately, the world had taken a toll on her, and he could feel her bruised soul from where he'd been sitting across the room. "You make a difference. How many people have you logged, transferred, fed, cared for, and befriended since you've been here?"

She blinked up at him. "I don't know."

He looked over at the binders. "Thousands. Your touch has affected the lives of thousands of people and given them a way to go forward. You've made a difference. Looking from an optic that focuses on the immediate past is a fallacy. You've had an impact since the day you walked into this camp. Don't sell yourself short."

A sweet smile spread across her full lips. "You are so utterly unexpected in the best possible way."

He lifted an eyebrow. "How's that?" Yes, he was too close, and yes, they were whispering, but fuck it. The woman had made it more than obvious she was interested in him, and he wasn't going to deny she was immensely tempting and sexy in a girl-next-door type of way. Which, at the moment, happened to be his favorite type of sexy.

She placed her hand on his chest. "Most people wouldn't see what you've seen. Most would be entrenched in their lives and move through this camp dealing with their assigned problem or task. You see everything."

"Everything." He dropped his eyes to her lips and then back up. She toed up, and he took the invitation. His lips found hers, and fuck him standing, they were just as soft as they looked. He lifted and waited for her to open her eyes. "This can't lead to anything."

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She smiled up at him, her eyelids heavy. “I already told myself that exact thing. You’ll be here for a couple of months. What’s wrong with having a friend for that time?”

“Just a friend?” He lowered to her lips and licked them. She sighed and opened for him. Holy hell. Was it possible to fucking know the woman would taste like this? He did. God, he knew she would be so fucking sweet. He felt her arms go around his neck, and his cock had woken the fuck up. Yeah, it so wasn’t the time or place for what they were doing. He lifted and glanced at the tent flap. “Not here and not now.” Shit, was that his voice? He sounded like he’d eaten fucking gravel.

She blinked and then glanced at the flap, too. “Shit.” She licked her lips and dropped to her heels. “I’m ... wow. I’m not sorry, but ...”

“Yeah.” He ran his hands through his hair and drew a shaky breath. “My fault.” He drew a deep breath and put some space between him and the sexual accelerant next to him. The chemistry between them was uncontrolled at the moment.

“It takes two.” She lifted her hand to her lips. “Wow.”

“You said that.” He walked back to where he’d put his helmet.

“Yeah, but it bears repeating.” She plopped back down on her chair.

“I’m going to ...” He nodded toward the exit flap.

She stood up. “Are you upset?”

Upset? Try harder than a diamond and ready to drill. He chuckled. “No, not upset. Dinner tonight?”

She nodded. “I’d like that.”

He winked at her and ducked out of the tent. As he put his helmet on, he drew a deep breath. Fuck, that was ... exceptional. He rolled his shoulders and headed to their camp. He was sure there was something he could be doing, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember what. Maybe that was because every fluid ounce of his blood was occupied elsewhere and not currently in his brain.

CHAPTER 8

Fleur walked into the daily debrief and sat in the rear of the tent. Miller mandated the debriefs for the staff so they could talk about their day and raise any concerns they’d encountered during their shift.

“Who’s first?” Miller asked.

“I have an issue.” Tammara Boyle raised her hand. “I lost my interpreter over a month ago, and I need help in the group sessions. My Arabic is at a toddler’s level.”

Fleur scrunched her face. Tammara was exaggerating a bit. She could keep up, but someone should be available to translate if Tammara missed something in such emotional situations. She raised her hand. Miller pointed to her. “Fleur?”

“Rana could translate. I can spare her from registration for the group therapy hours. But I’d want to ask her if she would first since she’s a volunteer resident.” Since she was no longer coordinating convoys, she could manage the check-in tent's registration table. Her Arabic was passable and, over the years, had gotten better.

“Would that work for you, Tammara?”

“Thank you.” The woman stood up. “Thanks, Fleur. I know I’m missing things I could be helping with.”

“Not a problem. I’ll ask her tonight.” She smiled at the psychologist. Rana was always willing to help, but she’d ask first.

She leaned back and listened to the sanitation crew’s issues. Then, the internal affairs group brought a new problem to light. They monitored sheltering and food dispersal. Civil engineering reported a new hole in the fence line adjacent to the medical tent. The links had been cut, not bent up, so it was probably smugglers. Miller turned and pointed at her. “You’ll let Guardian know?”

“Yes, sir. Was it repaired?”

Todd Floyd, the man in charge of the engineers, stood up and looked back at her. “Patched.” Heshrugged. “If they have cutters, nothing we do will stop them.”

She nodded. “Does Shelly and the crew over there know?”

He nodded. “Told her right after we found it, and she did an inventory. Nothing there was gone. I wouldn’t doubt we have a few turn up missing. There were a lot of tracks to and from that hole.”

“Damn it.” Fleur sighed. The woman next to her, who she didn’t know but by sight, nodded in agreement.

The meeting lasted longer than it needed to, but it always did. People needed to be able to raise concerns and have them acknowledged. Tammara also invited anyone who needed to talk to her to come to her work tent to see her. She was available for

camp staff from five to seven every night. There were small groups for the staff on Wednesday nights so they could come to grips with the suffering they witnessed daily. Overall, the camp was structured like every other IDP camp, but as they drew down and staff were reassigned, they became closer. The nightly debrief was mandatory, and most of the staff attended regularly.

When the meeting was over, she walked over to the hospital tent. “Knock, knock, Shelly. Are you here?”

“Yep. In the back,” Shelly called out to her. Fleur headed back to the small portion of the tent that was tarped off, which was where Shelly slept. “Girl, you had a hole in the fence not far from here.”

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Shelly looked up from the small trunk she was kneeling in front of. “Yeah, I know. Scares the shit out of me, too. If they come in here to get something, what will I do?” She sat down on her butt and waved at the small trunk. “I was just looking for something to use as protection.”

“What in the name of Methuselah’s grandma are you talking about?”

Jug’s voice from behind her made her gasp and spin around. “Dude, you have to announce yourself.” Fleur bent over and grasped her knees. “Holy hell, I’m going to die of a heart attack.”

Jug was not impressed by her drama and dismissed her comments, saying, “Yeah, sorry.” He sure didn’t sound it as far as Fleur was concerned. He turned to Shelly. “What are you talking about?”

“The hole in the fence.” Shelly pointed toward the back wall of the tent. “About ten feet in that direction.”

Jug spun and walked out of the tent. “Did you hear him come in?” Fleur still had her hand on her heart because the man had scared the daylights out of her.

“No. He’s awful quiet for a big guy, isn’t he?”

Fleur widened her eyes. “Yeah. Anyway, you can sleep in my tent. We can move your stuff over.”

“I might.” Shelly shut her trunk and extended her hand. Fleur grabbed it and helped

her up. “I like being here, though, in case someone needs me at night. It saves time.”

They walked into the clinic area, and Fleur sat on the exam table. “I was going to tell Ronan about the cut in the fence as soon as I made sure you weren’t freaking out, but I guess I don’t need to do that now.”

Jug walked back in. His expression was dark, and his jaw looked like he was grinding his teeth. He looked at Shelly and said, “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

She lifted her arms in the air. “When was I supposed to do that? This is the first time I’ve seen you today.”

Jug’s eyes narrowed even further, and he turned his accusing look at her. Fleur shook her head and held up her hands. “I just found out and came over to see if Shelly was okay. She’s not. She’s looking for a weapon.”

“Fleur!”

“Well, it’s the truth!” Fleur defended herself.

Jug’s frown deepened. “A weapon?”

“I sleep here,” Shelly said, which explained everything.

“Why?” Jug said. “Why don’t you have a tent?”

“Because it’s stupid to have a tent all to myself when the people here are sleeping on the ground out in the open. Both of us gave up our tents.”

“But my cousin sent me a small two-man tent. She can stay with me.” Fleur thought that would make the big guy happy, but ... no ...

“This is unacceptable.” Jug shook his head. “I’ll sleep out here so you can stay.”

“What?” both women said at the same time.

“You need to be here for the people of the camp, right? That’s why you’re set up back there.”

“Well, yeah.” Shelly frowned.

He pointed to the far corner. “I’ll sleep there. Nobody will bother you or your supplies. I guaran-fucking-tee it.”

Shelly shook her head. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t. I’m off watch at eleven. I won’t disturb you.” He turned and walked out of the tent.

Fleur turned her wide-eyed gaze at her friend. “Well, that kind of settles that, doesn’t it?”

“Holy shit, he’s intense, isn’t he?”

“Ah, yeah.” Fleur cocked her head and looked at her friend. “Your crush is going to be sleeping with you.”

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Shelly blinked and then laughed. “No, not with me.”

Fleur lifted her hands and teased. “Same tent.”

“Stop.” Shelly’s face turned red. “You know nothing can happen. There’s no privacy here.”

“Believe me, I know.” She pulled her braid over her shoulder and started messing with it.

Shelly smiled. “Girl, do you have something to share?”

Fleur couldn’t hide the smile that spread across her face. “He kissed me, and I almost died. He’s ...” She fanned herself.

Shelly gasped. “Oh, wow.” Her eyes went to the empty doorway. “I can’t imagine what it would be like to have a moment or two with a gorgeous man. It’s been forever.”

“Years.” Fleur sighed.

“Yep,” Shelly agreed, and they looked at each other.

“We’re complete messes, aren’t we?” Fleur asked.

“Total wrecks.”

“They’ll only be here for two months or so.”

“Then we go back to the States,” Shelly agreed.

“Are you going to take another tour with your NGO?”

Shelly shook her head. “Not right away.”

“Hot showers,” Fleur said dreamily.

“Fast food,” Shelly added.

“A glass of cold wine.”

“Oh, man, air conditioning,” Shelly added and sighed. “I love what I do here, but maybe it’s time to refill the well.”

“I think you may be right.” She’d fulfilled her contract obligations. It was probably time to return to the States and find a job there. She could probably impose on her cousin until she found a job and got an apartment.

“Dr. Shelly?”

A voice at the tent entrance broke them out of their silent reverie. “Come in,” Shelly greeted. “Got to go.”

“I’m outta here.” Fleur jumped down from the exam table. “Have fun tonight.”

“Stop,” Shelly reprimanded her as she met the little girl and one of the shelter workers. Fleur headed to the admin tent and found Rana. She called the woman out to speak with her.

Rana lifted an eyebrow when she saw her. “What are you up to now?”

Fleur laughed. “Nothing diabolical. Tammara was wondering if you could help translate during the group sessions. She gets most of the context but thinks she’s missing things, which bothers her.”

“I can, but who will ...” Rana glanced back at the registration table.

“I’ll relieve you or free up someone if I’m busy.” She shrugged. “The word seems to have gotten out that we’re closing. We don’t have the masses of people we used to have.”

Rana nodded. “This is true. I’ll talk to Tammara tonight and find out where she is meeting and when I’m needed.”

“Perfect. Once you get that settled, let me know. I think I still remember how to fill out the registration forms.” She winked at her friend.

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Rana smiled for a minute, then said. "I'm glad you aren't meeting the men. Thank you for changing your mind."

"Shelly told you."

"Of course, she did," Rana said. "I don't feel bad about talking to her. You were putting yourself in danger needlessly."

"I agree ... now." She glanced over to where the Americans were camped. "They're working hard to get the convoys going again."

"Did you notice the militia are actually at their posts today?" Rana nodded toward the posts outside the perimeter of the camp.

"Not surprising. The Americans are fierce." Which reminded her that she needed to ask Ronan what had happened at his morning meeting.

"And handsome," Rana said, lifting an eyebrow.

"Are they?" Fleur batted her eyes comically. "I hadn't noticed."

Rana laughed and shook her head. "I'm going to finish my forms. I'll bring them by the tent before I go find Tammara."

"Thank you." Fleur headed back to her tent. She wasn't sure when Ronan would be available for dinner and didn't want to interrupt his work. She glanced up at the sky. How was it possible that the arrival of a small team of men could change so much?

CHAPTER 9

Ronan glanced at the map they'd made of the camp. The outposts the militia were supposed to be stationed at were manned today because he'd laid down the law. If they wanted the money Guardian had access to, they'd do what they were paid to do. Habib was still in charge, at least for now. Bilal had left immediately after arriving at the small camp. He did, however, leave the people Guardian had negotiated to guard the area.

As Fleur had said, Habib seemed like one of the good guys. They discussed manning requirements and responsibilities. Habib fought him on only a few points, but they came to a mutually respected compromise.

The cut through the fence by the hospital tent was concerning, and when Jug had told him about it, he'd made tracks to the camp's structure people. From now on, they would be the first people notified if there were any compromises to the fence line. The fact that the lighting units illuminated the area and no one reported seeing anyone was disturbing. Either the camp occupants didn't notice or were afraid to report the incursion. Both were unacceptable.

Miller called from the outside of the tent flap. "It's Dupre, you wanted to talk to me?"

"Come in." Ronan stood and greeted the guy. He motioned to the ad hoc table they'd set up for him to work on. "I have a few questions and concerns."

"Sure, sure. What can I do to help you? Oh, man, is that candy?"

Ronan smiled and pushed the canteen cup filled with taffy toward the camp leader. "Have some."

"Thanks." He took one, unwrapped it, and popped it into his mouth, closing his eyes.

“Been a long time.”

“I heard.” Ronan sat down. “Last night, there was an incident with the fence line near the medical tent.”

“Yeah. When I found out about it, I told Fleur to tell you.”

He knew Fleur had been with Shelly when Jug had found out about the cut in the fence. He assumed she’d checked on her friend before coming to tell him, and he’d address the priorities of that visit tonight. “From now on, your structures people will immediately bring this to our attention. Additionally, all outposts will be manned by the militia. Habib and I have reached an agreement for manning and accountability. My men will ensure the militia follows our directives.”

“Thank you. We’ve tried everything in our power to get them to cooperate, but if you have nothing to back up your pleading and begging, they have no incentive to agree or help. And I can talk to the men who manage the fence.”

“I already have.” Ronan waited for the man to object to his straightforward approach.

“Good.” Miller rubbed his face. “Can I tell you I’m glad you’re here until we bug out? We’ve lost some damn good people and too many IDPs. It’s a shame it took loss of life for someone to call in people who knew what the hell they were doing.”

“I agree. However, this isn’t our usual gig. We’re more of the go in, do the job, and get gone type of team, so if there are growing pains, we’ll work through them.”

“Understandable. What do you need from me?”

“I need some of your people to work night shifts and be additional eyes on the camp.”

“Work at night?” Dupre frowned. “Doing what?”

“Whatever they’d do during the day. Half your teams. Those who only deal with the IDPs, like your medical teams, can all stay on the day shift. Everyone else, sanitation, structures, and logistics, should be split into twelve-hour shifts. That way, we have extra eyes on the camp. Some will have to provide security when the convoys are moving again.”

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Dupre shook his head. “Absolutely not. We don’t have any weapons, and our people wouldn’t use them anyway. We’re here to stop war, not to create one.”

“I’m not suggesting you use weapons. We will be with the convoy. The militia will be here. There’s no change from what you were doing before we arrived, but having someone actively monitor the checkpoints and sounding an alarm if something happens is necessary and should have been happening all along.” Which was an understatement. The lack of overall nighttime security was shocking.

Dupre frowned and stared at the piece of container he was using as a tabletop. “We’ve done the best we knew how to do.”

Ronan leaned back. “I’m not criticizing you for what you’ve done. I’m pointing out areas that need improvement. I didn’t bring you in here to chastise you, Miller. You and I are a team. Our goal is to get everyone out of here without losing anyone else.”

Dupre nodded. “Hindsight sucks.”

Ronan knew the guy was thinking of all the people he’d lost. “It does, but it also illuminates a path forward. We’re moving forward. The past is set in concrete. The future is the only thing we can change, and we’re making the correct changes to move forward and accomplish our mutual goals.”

Miller looked up at him. “How did the meeting with the militia go?”

“Habib is acceptable. I believe he, for the most part, is willing to do what we’re paying them to do. Will they sluff off if we don’t call them on it? Hell yes. That’s

why you only had a few posts manned.”

“As I said, we had no way to enforce anything, and the people in charge of ensuring the militia worked with us are on another continent. Getting them to understand what was happening or not happening was like pulling teeth. When I finally got one person to understand, they moved on in the organization and were replaced, and we were at square one again. After years of trying, I finally realized it wouldn’t happen. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting much when they said you were coming. I’m used to promises that go unfulfilled.”

“Guardian does what it says. Period.” Ronan crossed his arms over his chest. The guy had been through hell. All the people who worked in the camp had been through the wringer. It was a common experience, it seemed.

“I’m seeing that.” Dupre nodded. “Is there anything else you need?”

“Not at the moment. If there is, I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll go break the news. My people have already worked, most since sunup. Can I give them a day to make the transition?”

“Absolutely. My men will be on duty tonight and every other night until we’re out on a convoy, or we bug you out.”

“That’s the second time you said you would get the convoys going. Have you figured out what happened?”

“No, not yet, but even if we don’t, it’s my intention to put things in motion to get supplies in at a minimum and the people out as a best-case scenario. We were sent here to make it happen. As I said, Guardian does what it says it will do. Every time.”

“I can see that.” Dupre nodded. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me yet. Let’s get things moving first.” When Ronan stood, Dupre followed suit.

“Do you mind if I take some of that with me to the sections? Might make the nighttime shifts a little easier to take.”

“I’ll do you one better.” Ronan walked over to their supply trunk, took out a bag of the candy, and tossed it to Dupre. “There’s more when that runs out.”

“Oh, man. You better watch your tent. If the word gets out that you have the good stuff, they’ll be breaking in here.” Dupre laughed as he tossed the heavy bag into the air. “I think you might have just raised morale to its highest point in years.”

Ronan smiled as the man walked out of the tent. Wraith came out from behind the panel that divided the cots from the work area. “Went well.”

Ronan nodded. “You could’ve come out.”

“Nah, you were bonding.” Wraith chuckled.

“He’s not a bad guy. Just stuck in fuck-all circumstances.”

Wraith nodded and sat down. “Jug’s got it bad.”

“Yeah, he does.” Ronan rubbed his face. “I don’t want to have the birds and bees conversation with him.”

Wraith laughed and stood up. “Don’t forget to have that talk with yourself.”

Ronan lifted his eyebrows and cocked his head. “Excuse me?”

“Happened to walk in the convoy tent this morning. Walked back out.”

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Ronan groaned, “Shit.” That was not what he needed. “I’ve got it covered.”

“Sure.” Wraith chuckled. “Sure, you do.” He grabbed his M-4 and helmet as he left.

“Awful chatty today, aren’t you?” Ronan called after him.

“I’m done,” Wraith called back.

Ronan shook his head and stood up. He needed to find Fleur. He’d just left his tent when Dude came across the comms. “Skipper, you have an incoming call from Alpha. Are you in a secure location?”

Ronan hit his communication device. “Dude, there’s nothing secure about this camp, but hold on. Let me go back into the tent.”

After returning to his tent, he removed his helmet and put his M-4 back in the rack. “Okay, send it.”

“Standby,” Dude said. “Alpha’s online. The connection is secure. I’m clear.”

“How are you doing?” Jacob King asked by way of greeting.

“We’re okay. Working with the militia is always fun. This IDP camp is interesting. I don’t know why I assumed they had UN peacekeepers.”

“Too many camps, not enough resources. If the locals say the militia are working as guards, the NGOs generally take that at face value. What do you want to know about

Al?”

“Who’s Al?” Ronan frowned.

“Adil Abdo. We called him Al.”

“Wait, what? Who is we, and how did you know him?”

“The last operation the old Alpha team went on was in Syria quite a while back.”

“I remember that. Talon said something about it. Old guys trying to find their fountain of youth or something.” That wasn’t the case, but he liked picking at his uncle.

“Bullshit.” Jacob laughed. “Al is a good kid. He was thirteen when we were there, and we leaned heavy on him. He knows those tunnels outside Aleppo like the back of his hand. How did you come across him?”

“He’s working the communications tent here. And he was working every day the convoys were attacked.”

Jacob was silent for a moment. “I can’t see him being a part of something like that. His entire family was killed during that damn war, and he survived by working with Guardian. We’ve used him as recently as a year or so ago when we were looking for some radicals we believed were in the tunnels. I think Tango team went on that mission. Hold on.”

Ronan frowned. They had an asset in the camp, and he wasn’t made aware of it. That was unusual.

“Yep. Tango team,” Jacob confirmed.

“Why wasn’t I made aware that he’s here?”

“We don’t have reins on him, Ronan. He’s free to go and do whatever he wants, but when we reach out, he answers. He has a foreign national clearance, and I tagged it just to keep tabs on him. He was a good kid, a good man, now I assume. If he got into trouble and called on me, I’d send help.”

“Then he might have an idea of what’s going on?”

“He could. The kid had his ear to the ground. I doubt that’s changed much. It was a survival technique. Things haven’t gotten much easier in that area.”

“Thanks. That could help.”

“I got your request for supplies. Dude forwarded it.”

Ronan frowned. “Which request was that?”

“Hold on, I have it right here. Lighting units, portable generators, meal rations, medical supplies, and six transport vehicles. I’m assuming that’s for the IDP movement. Before I approve this and get them to you, where do you stand on identifying why the convoys were targeted?”

“We’ve identified the day of the week, which corresponds with Al’s working in the communications tent, but that could be a coincidence.”

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“Could be, but ...”

“I understand. Don’t trust, and verify.”

“Yep. What else do you have?”

“Dude is trying to determine what satellites fly over during the times of the attacks and who would have access to each of them as they fly over. A needle in a haystack search, but if anyone can find what we need, it’s Dude and Tink.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“Honestly, I didn’t know we needed what Dude had requested.” Which was the truth. Dude was in charge of keeping them supplied, so it didn’t surprise him that he’d made a requisition for the supplies he thought the camp needed.

“Do you approve the request?” Jacob asked.

“Always.” He was positive the camp could use everything Dude had requested. The only question was ... “Where are you shipping them?”

“Al-Tanf Garrison. It would be a long day, and you’d need to take drivers for the vehicles.”

“That can be worked. There’s enough staff here, so I’m sure we can manage. When will it be in country?”

Alpha made a humming noise. "It looks like four days. I'll give Dude the exact time and date."

"Copy that. In the meantime, I'm working with the militia. The man in charge seems amenable to instruction, but it's still early. I'm not counting on total cooperation."

"See, you can be taught."

"No offense meant, but screw you, Uncle Jacob."

Jacob's laughter was loud and clear. "None taken. How's the team?"

"Everyone is fine."

"Good to know. Take care, kid. Whatever it takes."

"As long as it takes." Ronan cleared the call and then tapped his piece, alerting Dude, who came online immediately.

"What do you need, Skipper?"

"You to tell me when I'm requesting six trucks and a fuck-ton of supplies."

Dude laughed. "Yeah, sorry about that. When I couldn't figure out how to get one of our transports over you without getting them shot down, I ordered them. Sorry about that."

Ronan chuckled. "No worries this time, just don't leave my ass hanging out there like that again."

"You got it," Dude acknowledged. "I'm balls deep in satellite information and have

more to go through before I can even attempt to narrow down who might have access to the machinery. I'm surprised there isn't a cosmic freeway disaster up there. I had no idea there were so many. I just cared about the ones we use."

"Do what you have to do. I know you're not sluffing on us."

"No way in hell, Skipper," Dude pledged. "Need anything else?"

"Yeah, add about ten or fifteen tents to that order, will you?"

"Not enough accommodations over there?"

"Not even close."

"What size do you need?"

"Ten as big as you can get. Five personal sizes."

“You got it. Anything else?”

“Did you order more taffy? I have a feeling our stash is going to be gone soon.”

“Of course, I did.” Dude scoffed. “Did you think I’d forget your crack?”

“Just making sure. You know how cranky we get if we don’t have our sugar fix.”

“Boy, do I. Not fun at all. Take care of yourself over there. Oh, Tink said she sent you the report you asked for. It’s in your inbox.”

“Thanks, I’ll look at it tonight. I’m clear.” Ronan tapped his earpiece and stood up, again grabbing his helmet and rifle. Maybe he was being selfish, but then again, he didn’t care. He’d provide for the IDPs and make sure Fleur and Shelly had their tent. If Jug was half as deeply infatuated with Shelly as he was with Fleur, not having privacy would soon be a problem. Four days. Let the countdown begin.

CHAPTER 10

“Are you home?”

Fleur smiled and moved to the flap of her tent. She unzipped it and looked up at Ronan. “I am.” She extended her hand, and he grasped it, helping her out of her small tent. “Did Jug tell you about our excitement?” She bent down and rezippped the flap on her tent. When her backside brushed against him, he grabbed her hip, and she heard a stifled groan. She spun around. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that. I flirt, but that was going over the line, and I wouldn’t do that publicly. Unless you told me you

liked it.” She glanced around and lifted her eyebrows several times.

“It’s all right. Accidents happen, and if they are helped along, who am I to complain?” Ronan said, putting his hand on her shoulder. He cleared his throat and then shook his head before saying, “However, I wanted to talk to you about the hole in the fence. You should’ve come to tell me as soon as you found out about it.”

“But it was fixed.” She frowned. “What difference would it make? It happened last night. Shelly was scared, though. She was going through her things, looking for a weapon if someone entered the medical tent. Jug was pissed.” She smiled up at him. “I think he likes Shelly and doesn’t know how to let her know, but that’s okay because she likes him, too.” Ronan stared down at her, and she blinked. Why was he giving her that look? Oh. “I’m blabbering, aren’t I? Sorry, I do that when I’m nervous.”

“Okay. Back up for a minute. First, you should have alerted one of us as soon as you knew about the security deviation, even if it was fixed. We’re in charge of security now. Second, she’s a doctor. Did she ever think about a scalpel? Third, what Jug does isn’t my business as long as the relationship is consensual, but yes, he was pissed, and he’s sleeping in the medical tent as a precaution until we get your tents.”

Fleur frowned. “Okay, I won’t make that mistake again. Two, no, I don’t think she thought of a scalpel, but I’ll mention it to her, and last, what tent?”

Ronan narrowed his eyes. “You can’t mix up first, last, and numbers. There’s a rule about that.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Is there?”

“Pretty sure.” He nodded.

“Huh.” She crossed her arms. “I had no clue.” She looked back up at him. “Are you mad?”

“Once again, the answer to that is no. How about I tell you if I’m mad? That way, you won’t have to keep guessing.”

“Oh, I like that idea.” Fleur smiled at him. “Tent?”

“I ordered fifteen. Ten as big as they make for the IDPs and five personal tents. I couldn’t remember how many you said had given up their tents for the camp occupants.” He looked around them. “Since all the space here is taken, we’ll put yours closer to our camp.”

“We will?” She smiled up at him. “That would be convenient.”

“Only if you agree.” His stare was intense, and she got the idea her answer was critically important. She stopped smiling at him and said as clearly as possible, “I want a bigger tent near your camp so you can visit me privately. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

His breath came out in a rush. “God, yes. It’s going to be a long four days.”

“Four days?”

He nodded. “I’ll return to Al-Tanf Garrison to pick up the supplies and six transport vehicles.”

“You’re starting the convoys?”

“We’re getting ready to do it. I need more information and clarification before pulling the trigger, but that’s the goal.”

She closed her eyes and tipped her head back to the heavens. “Thank you, God, for sending these men to us.”

“Can you drive a transport vehicle?”

She lifted her head and blinked at him. “Sure. Everyone here can. We’ve all been trained, and I’ve often driven across this country as part of the convoys. The locals don’t like it, especially the clans with religious affiliations. You know, we women aren’t capable of anything except caring for a home and raising a family, according to their beliefs, but we do what we need to do.” She shook her head. “Sometimes I worry about the world.”

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He turned her and pointed her to his tent. “We can talk about our worries over dinner.”

“That sounds like a plan.” She walked beside him. “Miller stopped by and told me I would be working nights.”

“No.” Ronan shook his head. “No, you’ll be on days. I’ll let him know.”

Wasn’t that favoritism? “But ...”

“You’ll be working the same shift I am. End of conversation.” Ronan stopped. “Unless you want us to be on different schedules and not have private time together.”

“Oh.” She didn’t think about that. “Won’t he think it’s favoritism?”

“I don’t give a flying donkey’s ass what Miller thinks.” Ronan barked out a laugh.

“Well, that’s a descriptive narrative.” Fleur laughed with him, and as they approached the tent, she put her hand on his arm. “Are you sure you have enough food?”

“Absolutely, and we’re restocking in four days. Everyone will have enough food soon.”

“Shelly and I were talking about the things we missed from home. Fast food was one.” Ronan held the flap open for her, and she entered. “Oh, you have an office now.” She stepped over to the table and looked at the map on the surface.

“A small one, but it works.”

She pointed to the Xs on the map. “What are these?”

“Security checkpoints manned by the militia.”

Fleur slowly turned to look at him. “You got them to agree to man all these?”

He nodded. “I did.”

She shook her head. Miller had been trying for ages to get the militia off their butts to do their jobs. “Once again, sir, you are unexpected and amazing.”

Ronan smiled down at her. “I only do my job. Let’s eat.”

She followed him into the cot area and sat down on his. “Chicken burrito bowl?” he asked as he held up an MRE.

“Sure.” She caught the bag he tossed to her and opened it. Then he selected one for himself and moved over, sitting on the ground beside her after he put his weapon in the rack. “So, if you got the militia to man the posts, your talk must have gone well. Is Habib still there?”

“He is. The fuckwad we’d dealt with left after depositing his people here. Habib was cooperative for the most part. We had some differences of opinion but were able to come to terms.”

“And what were the differences? It had to do with women, didn’t it?”

He nodded as he poured water into his flameless heating pouch. Then he handed her the canteen, and she did the same. “They won’t attempt to stop any male from

stopping a woman or girl from entering the camp.”

She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes. “Still.”

“We’ll be on watch for anything, and believe me, we’ll stop anyone from prohibiting a person from entering, day or night,” Ronan said as he handed her his candy packet. She smiled and thanked him. She’d share it with Rana or Shelly tomorrow.

She glanced over at him. While waiting for him, she’d made a list of things she wanted to know about him. “Where did you grow up?”

He glanced up at her. “Mostly Colorado and Virginia. My dad worked in Virginia, and we spent summers at our home in Colorado.”

She stopped opening her tortilla shells. “Two homes? Were your parents rich?”

He shrugged. “I guess. Guardian pays well.”

“It must. Can I get a job with them?” She laughed and went back to opening her food.

He nudged her leg with his elbow. “Yes.”

She frowned. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I mean I could try to get you a job with Guardian. You wouldn’t have to work in these conditions.”

She lowered her hands to her lap, settling the food before she spoke. “Four years ago, I would’ve told you I don’t care what the conditions are. I’ll make a difference; this is where I want to be.”

“But now?” That deep voice of his reverberated around her.

“Now?” She took a deep breath and stared at the back wall of his tent. “Now, I’m tired. I’ve fought, I’ve kicked, I’ve screamed, but no one listens. I’m ready to go back to the States. I have a degree in project management and lots of experience”—she spun her spoon in a circle before her—“but I don’t think much of this translates into the corporate world.”

“You’d be surprised,” Ronan said as he opened his food. “I’m not joking, Fleur. If you want a job, I can make that happen. You’d have to do the work, but I could open the door for you.”

She huffed out a breath. “You’re serious? Are you that much of a bigwig with this company?”

He shook his head. “No, but I know the people who run the company. I’m very close to them.” He threw her a glance. “My sisters and my uncle.”

She sat back a bit and blinked. “Then why in the world are you working in this place?”

He smiled and took a bite of a cracker on which he’d piled a mound of spreadable cheese. “Because I like it,” he said when he could talk.

“You like it?” Well, that wasn’t what she expected. “You don’t want a fancy job with a big desk? Suits and ties?”

He laughed. “No, suits and ties are not my idea of a good time, but eventually, I’ll work with them. That’s been the plan for a long time. But for now, I’ll stay with my team. We rotate back to the States enough that I don’t miss it.”

“How often is that?”

“We’re usually on duty for three months. That’s when we deploy. Then we’re back in the States for a month off, a month of training, and standby for a month. We chill and are back on the cycle if there are no missions. Three months on, three months off.”

“So, you work eight months out of the year if you count training.”

“And if there aren’t any emergencies, yes.”

“That sounds like heaven.” She would love to have a month off. “Oh, could you imagine sleeping in a soft bed with an air conditioner, a ceiling fan, black-out curtains ...” She sighed. “I think I could stay in bed an entire month.”

She glanced down at him and froze. The hungry look in his eyes had nothing to do with food. “I’d spend that month in bed with you.”

Oh, Lord. That voice vibrated all the way down to her lady bits and pooled there. She

opened her mouth to say something but promptly forgot what it was. Damn ... the visual that was planted in her thoughts sent a whole-body shiver through her. She whispered, "I'd let you."

Ronan held her eyes with his gaze before moving his dinner and lifting to his knees before her. "That kiss," he said as he cupped his hand around the back of her neck. "That fucking kiss still kicks my ass," he growled, and her body tightened in memory of that kiss.

It was still kicking her ass, too. She sighed and said, "It can't be real, can it?"

He slowly moved his head from side to side. "Not possible. It has to be an aberration."

"Has to be. We should do it again, just to be sure," she whispered against his lips.

He closed the distance, and ... oh ... sweet heaven above ... another full-body shiver ran through her. He took control of the kiss and angled his mouth, delving into her mouth. Forceful yet gentle, controlling yet asking, sensual and panty-torching hot, the kiss was more than the first. So unexpected and completely perfect. He pulled her against him, and she spread her legs, getting as close to his kneeling body as she could. He wrapped his arm in her braid and pulled her closer. She could feel his desire, and the heat he'd ignited inside her needed to be quenched. He pulled away and kissed down to her jaw, and tugging gently on her braid, he moved to her neck. "Fuck, you're like a drug. I lost my mind at the first taste." He licked her throat, and she shivered again. "So fucking responsive. I want you. God help me, I fucking need to have you."

"Yes." It was the only word she could think or say. Yes to anything and everything this man wanted from her.

She felt him jerk up and opened her eyes. His eyes were closed tight as if he were in pain. He held up a finger and then tapped his ear. "Go ahead." He looked down at her. The hunger was still there. She leaned forward, and his hand held her against him. "Same ETA for delivery? Copy. Anything else?" He unwound his arm from her braid as he listened to whoever he was talking to, and that told her he wasn't going to resume the most wonderful make-out session she'd ever had.

He still held her against him as he ended the call and his hand rubbed her back. "We're fucking dangerous."

She nodded. "The chemistry ..."

"Fucking dangerous," he repeated as he held her.

He tugged at her braid, and she looked up at him. His eyes were so dark as he stared at her. She whispered, "I'm not afraid of this danger."

He smiled wickedly. “You should be.”

Oh, God. That threat was not cooling the heat between her legs. Another full-body shiver drove through her. She wanted more of that sensation. More of him, more of them. He lowered and dropped a kiss on her forehead. “We can’t. Not until we have some semblance of privacy.”

“Four days.”

“Three. I’m taking us in the day before. I’ll sell my soul to get us a private billet.” He lifted away from her and sat on his heels as his hands slid to her hips.

She reached up and touched his cheek. “It could be a long three days.”

His eyes closed, and he drew a deep breath. “No doubt.” His eyes popped open again, and he hit his ear. “Go.” He was up on his feet before she knew what was happening. “On my way.” He was across the tent, grabbing his M-4 as he ordered, “Stay here.”

She didn’t have a chance to answer him. He was gone. A finger of fear launched down her spine. She glanced at the flap to the outside and walked over to it. She moved it and stared into the darkness. She could hear the sounds of the camp and ... The sounds of shouting. A gunshot split the night. Fleur grabbed the tent flap. Another shot. She saw Miller emerge from his tent. “Stay in your tent!” she yelled at him. He glanced over at her and acknowledged her with a wave.

The wait was horrendous. The minutes dragged, and each tiny sound was amplified. There were no normal camp sounds, and the area was eerily quiet except for a baby

crying toward the back of the camp, which faded after a few minutes. Fleur pulled one of the chairs by the ad hoc table and sat outside the tent, waiting for what seemed like an eternity. She saw Ronan walking through the camp, and her feet moved of their own accord. She flew over the ground, leaped ground ties, and launched herself against him. “Are you okay? Your team?”

“We’re fine. I need to talk to Miller. Let’s go.”

She let go of him and walked with him to Miller’s tent. “What happened?” The camp leader demanded as soon as he saw Ronan.

“Let’s go inside.” Ronan nodded to Miller’s tent.

“Right. Come in.” Miller led them in. The flap to his private bunk was open, but he directed them toward the desk. “Was anyone hurt?”

“The man who’d taken a girl shot at one of my men. That was a deadly mistake. The girl is fine, and someone named Tammara is talking to her. Shelly said she was the camp counselor.”

“Yes, yes, she is. Dear God. How did he get in?”

Fleur swung her attention to Ronan, wanting the same answer. “It appears one of your staff or one of the camp occupants has been cutting holes in the fence, allowing the poaching of the camp’s occupants.”

“What are you talking about?” Miller blustered. “One of the NGOs? That can’t be. Who?”

“It’s true. The cuts in the fence prove it. We were able to see the damage before someone fixed it.” Ronan leaned forward. “The cuts were between militia posts

protecting the man who came into the camp. My men were patrolling when they saw him pulling the girl toward the fence.”

“How do we determine who’s responsible?” Miller shook his head. “My God, like we don’t have enough problems without someone inside the camp helping those bastards.”

“And identifying where the unaccompanied people are located. Wraith questioned the people in surrounding huts and shelters. Some were still awake and heard nothing. That tells me this man knew where he was going and who he was after.”

“Fuck,” Miller whispered. “We search everything that comes into the camp. Wire cutters would have been confiscated and placed in the lockdown bin.”

“The what?” Ronan asked.

“The lockdown bin is where we put arrivals’ potentially dangerous possessions. They’re tagged with the person’s name and given back when they leave—knives over three inches long, heating elements with no controls—a fire would spread through the camp like wildfire. We have designated fire areas for those who want to cook their food.” Miller shook his head. “I check that box every morning and every night to ensure it’s secured. I have a key, and so does Fleur. Besides us, no one opens or closes it.”

Ronan glanced at her, and she nodded in agreement. Although the bin contained many small items, she’d never seen wire cutters. Ronan turned back to Miller and said, “Which leads us to one of the staff.”

“But who? Why?”

“The who I can’t answer yet. The why? Money.” Ronan stood up. “I’m heading to the

militia camp to see if anyone will ID the man who was killed. It's a long shot."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Pull in your trusted staff. Fleur, Shelly, the ones you know one hundred percent wouldn't be involved. Keep it small. Four or five people. Let them know what we suspect. Have them keep their eyes open as they move around the camp. Look for clearings beside the fence line or anyone who happens to be lingering by the fence. Also, anyone counting steps."

"Counting steps?" Fleur was confused.

"They're measuring the distance from the opening to the victim's location. But, Miller, without fail, no one is to engage with the person acting suspiciously. I can't stress that hard enough. Let us handle it. If this person thinks they're trapped, they could lash out, and you could lose more staff." He stood up and looked at Fleur. "I won't be back anytime soon."

"I'll put your food away." She stood up, too.

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“Thanks. Miller, I’ll brief you on what I find in the morning. Don’t make a huge scene briefing the people you trust. Fleur can talk to Shelly, and if you tell two more people before the camp settles back down, no one will think anything is amiss. Remember, only people you trust.”

Miller nodded. “Mathias Gentry. He’s been with me for years, like Fleur and Shelly. I trust him with my life.”

Ronan nodded at the man and gave her a quick smile before leaving the tent. “What the hell?” Miller said as he dropped to his chair. “A fucking traitor.”

“It’s probably someone in the camp, Miller. There are close to four thousand desperate people in this camp. Don’t put the horse before the cart.”

“Do you think a woman would do this to other women?” Miller’s eyes widened.

Fleur sighed. “Honestly, I wouldn’t put anything past anyone at this point. We still don’t know why or how the convoys were targeted.” She pointed to the tent exit. “I’m going to go talk to Shelly.”

“I’ll follow you out,” Miller said, and they left the tent together. Fleur rubbed her arms to ward off the gooseflesh as she walked through the dark camp. She’d never actually felt fear walking through the camp before tonight. Now, she couldn’t shake it.

Ronan walked into the hut Habib lived in and stared at the man. “Who is he?” Ronan spoke in Arabic.

The man cocked his head. “You speak my language?”

“Fluently.” Ronan crossed his arms. “Who’s inside the camp?”

“I don’t know. Only that someone helps the poachers.” The man shrugged his shoulder. “It is only women. It is of no concern.”

The concept made him sick to his stomach. But at least the man didn’t try to lie to him. “That is not our belief. Women matter as much as men. They used to matter in this country, too.”

“Years ago. Now?” He shrugged again.

“How many men did you lose when the convoys were attacked?”

Habib squinted his eyes. “Two, maybe three. Our directions were to provide escort, not to engage with hostile forces.”

“Your directions working for me are clear. If anyone attacks a convoy, you will defend it by any means necessary.”

“Of course, you made that clear. I’m not an idiot.”

“You’ve received your first payment.” He knew Habib’s people had received money. The information was dropped in his email this morning.

“We have. This is a good thing.” Habib stood. “Guardian, we are civil. I do not engage in poaching. My men have been told to alert you should they see it. We like

the money you bring, so we won't screw this up, as you say."

Ronan asked one more time. "Who is inside the camp? Staff or occupant?"

Habib's eyebrows rose a bit. "A smart man. Is there anything else?"

Ronan shook his head. Habib didn't deny it was a staff member, and he was going with his gut. It had to be a staff member. Fuck. He reached out his hand, and Habib took it. The money in his palm passed between the men, and Habib put his hand in his pocket. "I like money, Guardian. I have plans to have much of it in the future. Watch your back, enemies are closer than you think."

Ronan nodded and exited the hut. He sat in the passenger seat, and Wraith drove them back to the camp. "It has to be a staff member."

Wraith let out a string of cuss words. Fucking greed was how he finished his word dump. Ronan agreed. Someone, a staff member, was making money by allowing access to the camp and the people who lived there. He'd find the bastard and make sure the fucker paid. Preying on the people they were there to help. The thought disgusted him.

After they disposed of the body, he walked the camp. It was quiet. Soft snores came from the huddled shelters. He memorized every spot he'd select for a possible opening. If the bastard tried to do it again, they'd catch him.

"Skipper?" Jug's voice came across the comms.

"Go," he said quietly, not wanting to startle the camp.

"A word. Privately."

Ronan acknowledged his man and turned to retrace his footsteps to the medical tent area. Jug was waiting for him outside the tent. “You should be asleep.”

Jug grunted. "So should you."

"What do you need?"

"Shelly doesn't need to be in this tent. That bullet the fucker shot toward Stryker took out a guideline." He pointed to the obvious fix to the rope that kept the roof of the medical tent upright.

He nodded. "What does she think about that?"

"She's ready to move. She was in the tent when the roof started to collapse. When I called her out to take care of the girl, she had tears in her eyes. Skipper, no one who works in these camps should be subjected to this shit."

"Don't I know it," Ronan agreed with his friend. "I have tents coming in the shipment we're receiving in four days. Five of them are personal size. One for Fleur and one for Shelly." He looked at Jug. "For various reasons."

The big guy scrubbed his face. "I haven't acted on anything. She's high class and a doctor, Skipper. I'm just me. High school education and a grunt in the military until you picked me up."

"Your worth isn't based on your formal education, Jug. You're a valuable asset to this company. You're worth your weight in gold, and, dude, you got a lot of weight." He backhanded his friend's stomach.

Jug laughed. "Thanks." He rubbed his stomach and glanced at the medical tent. "I

don't know."

"Let her make that call, Jug. Put yourself out there. The worst she can say is no."
Ronan crossed his arms. "You might be pleasantly surprised."

Jug shrugged. "Maybe. Where are you putting Fleur's tent?"

"Close to ours. We can put Shelly's on the other side. Close, but not too close."
Ronan lifted an eyebrow.

Jug nodded. "Yeah, that would be good. I'll talk to her in the morning when she wakes up."

Ronan dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Get some sleep."

Jug nodded and headed toward the tent. Ronan scanned the camp one last time before returning to his tent. When he entered the bunk area, he smiled. Someone had turned back his sleeping bag and placed his MRE neatly on the storage trunk.

"Your woman," Wraith said from the dark.

"Figured." He stowed his weapon and took off his web gear. He dropped on top of the sleeping bag, keeping his boots on. Until they figured out who was the fucking enabler in the camp, he needed to be able to respond at a moment's notice.

"How deep are you?" Wraith asked from across the room.

"Over my head, man. Over my fucking head."

A chuckle made it his way. "About time."

“Right, and should we talk about you? Your folks would love for you to get married and settle down.”

There was silence for quite a long time before Wraith said, “Some things you can’t unsee.”

Ronan sighed. He got it. He knew exactly what Wraith was talking about. The man had to grow up fast, and he had. “I know. Someday, you might change your mind.”

Wraith made a noncommittal sound, and Ronan knew he was done talking. He closed his eyes and tried to calm his mind. It should be easy. He should be able to shut down, close up shop, and turn out the lights. Only his brain was running laps around the night's events, starting with that second kiss with Fleur. Fuck, he was gone over that woman, and that made zero sense since he’d only known her for a couple of days. The chemistry between them was hotter than the deepest trenches of hell. Satan would singe his flaming fingers on the heat they generated.

Ronan turned onto his side and tried to calm his mind. He focused on the person inside the camp. He flopped back onto his back. “Do you think the person in the camp could be the same one who provided information on the convoys?”

“Damn good possibility,” Wraith said from the darkness.

But who? Ronan stared up at the roof of the tent. A staff member. How would they benefit? Monetarily? Yeah, but fuck, seven deaths and all those people taken. Did this person have any morals? The question had an obvious answer: Fuck, no, they didn’t.

Ronan’s eyes popped open, and he sat up immediately alert.

“Didn’t mean to wake you,” Wraith said as he approached the exit flap of the tent.

“Time?”

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“Five. I need to relieve Wolf and Stryker.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

“No worries. I’ve got the militia. You find the fuckwad inside the camp.”

Ronan stretched. “Not that easy.”

“Didn’t say it was.” As Wraith swooped out of the tent, Ronan rolled his eyes. He used his canteen water to give himself a sponge bath before heading out. The first person he saw was Miller. The man was pacing outside his tent. When he saw Ronan, he hot-footed it in his direction.

“Did you get information from Habib?”

Ronan lifted his head at the urgency Miller was projecting. “Such as?”

“Such as who did this? Who’s involved?”

“No,” Ronan replied.

Miller stopped and dropped his head. “So, we don’t know who’s doing this?”

“No. Habib said he knew someone inside the camp was helping but didn’t know who.” Ronan didn’t want the man to stress any more than he was and letting him know it was probably a staff member would strain the man in a way everyone could see. He wasn’t very good at hiding his emotions. The fact that he was distraught over

what happened was obvious.

Miller nodded. "What can I do?"

"Did you talk to the men you mentioned last night?"

"I did." Miller put his hands on his hips. "We'll keep an eye out. I plan on being out of my tent more than normal."

Ronan could understand the rationale, but ... "Perhaps changing your pattern of behavior isn't the best option. Let's not alarm or perhaps warn anyone unnecessarily by taking actions that are outside the norm."

"Oh, good call," Miller said, wiping his face with his hand. "After an incident like last night, it would be normal for me to be out and about, but I'll be careful." Miller nodded to himself. "Yeah, that's good."

"Did you need anything else?"

"What? No, no. I didn't sleep last night. Worried, you know." Miller shook his head. "Have you learned anything about the convoys?"

Ronan shook his head. "Still working on it." He was on his way to talk to Adil. But Guardian's resource didn't need to be outed to anyone at this camp.

"You let me know if you find out anything." Miller squared his shoulders. "And if you hear anything about who works inside this camp." He looked over his shoulder at the lines of tents. "Thousands of desperate people around here."

Ronan agreed, but they could eliminate about eighty percent of those people. He had a feeling most people wouldn't cut holes in fences to take women and girls. Add to

that Habib hinted the person was on staff, and they were down to a few percentage points. “I’ll need a roster of all of your staff.”

“What? Why? Do you think it is a staff person?”

Ronan held up a hand. The vein on Miller’s head bulged dangerously. “No, this has nothing to do with that. I’d like to know who has large vehicle driver licenses and who are considered mandatory in camp, who can be used for convoys when they start back up, and a couple of other things.”

“Oh. Okay.” Miller nodded his head. “I can get that for you.”

“Thank you. Could you give it to Fleur? I’ll collect it from her.”

“Alexander, since I’m the camp lead, perhaps you should work things through me, not Fleur.”

Ronan cocked his head. “She’s my point of contact in this camp. I’ll keep you in the loop on all things as the lead for this facility, but all my actions will be worked through Fleur as my orders require.”

Miller looked up at him and grunted, “Make sure you do that,” before marching toward his tent.

That man was worked the hell up. Ronan rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. Three hours of sleep was usually enough, but fuck him standing. He could use some caffeine. He weaved his way through the tents until he reached the communications tent. As he ducked in through the open flap, a young man turned around. “May I help you?” he asked politely.

“Are you AI?”

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The man blinked, and a bright smile flashed across his face. “Adil, actually, but yes, I answer to Al sometimes.”

“Jacob suggested I should talk to you about some events around the camp.” Ronan sat down.

Adil smiled and glanced around. “A good man. We shouldn’t talk here. Tonight, two in the morning, a half mile outside the fence due west, there’s a path to the south. Follow it. I’ll meet you when I’m sure you aren’t followed.”

“I won’t be alone.” He wasn’t born yesterday.

“I wouldn’t expect you would be. I’ll know if it is your man or someone else.” Adil smiled and glanced at the flap then whispered, “You should go. It isn’t safe for me to have you here.”

Ronan stood and shouldered his M-4 just as a man he didn’t recognize entered the tent. “Adil, I need ... Oh, hello. I’m sorry, were you busy?”

“No, I’m just making my rounds and introducing myself to the camp. Ronan Alexander, team lead for your new security.”

“Oh. Good to meet you. Miller said you’d be around. I’m Mathias Gentry.” The man extended his hand, and Ronan shook it then nodded at Adil. “Good to meet you and thank you for giving medirections.” He looked at Mathias. “Looking for the structures tent.”

“Oh, that’s my team. Give me a second to finish with Adil, and I’ll take you to our area.”

“Sure.” Ronan crossed his arms over his chest and waited for Mathias to give Adil the message he needed to be transmitted for required supplies.

“Rumor has it the convoys may start soon, so I want the supplies waiting for us if they do,” Mathias said to Ronan as they left, and he motioned in the direction of his tent. “I know you talked to a couple of my guys yesterday. Frankly, we’ve always repaired the cuts in the fence without thinking about notifying people first. Then last night ...” Mathias shook his head. “Miller pulled me aside and talked to me. Hopefully, we haven’t been aiding those bastards by trying to keep the fence line secure.” The man stopped. “You don’t think we have, do you? I have daughters and granddaughters. I couldn’t live with myself if something I told these guys to do was helping those people.”

Ronan stopped and considered the question. “Probably not. You didn’t have anyone to investigate the process.”

“We had some government people here for security oversight. Let me tell you, they were the laziest people on the face of the earth. Getting them out of their tent took an earthquake or someone getting a bottle of booze into the country illegally.” Mathias shook his head. “Don’t like to talk bad about people. I’m sure they did the best they could.” He looked at Ronan. “Did you buy that?”

Ronan chuckled. “Not in the slightest.”

Mathias gave an exaggerated sigh. “I told my late wife Monique before she died that I’d try to see the good in people. I’m trying. Haven’t quite obtained the knack.”

“You’re probably better at it than I am,” Ronan said as they continued to walk

through the camp.

“Doubtful.” Mathias laughed. “Here we are. This is our corner of heaven.” He lifted the flap of a large tent. Tools were lying on shelves, along with several cutters that could have been used to make the hole last night.

“You have some good equipment.” Ronan walked past the shelves as he followed Mathias.

“We take good care of them, too. We have a maintenance schedule. I sold a successful construction company before I started to work with this organization and know that tools are the lifeblood of keeping something like this going.”

“Do you inventory the equipment?”

“Sure do, every night before I turn in.” Mathias opened the back flap. “Guys, this is Ronan Alexander. He’s in charge of security now. Everyone has heard about what happened last night by now.” All the heads moved up and down.

“As I told some of you yesterday, you need to inform us of any breach in the fence and don’t fix it until we’ve examined it.”

“Why’s that?” one of the men asked. His British accent reminded Ronan that the camp was staffed by a multi-national workforce of good people trying to do good things for the less fortunate.

“We hope to obtain a direction of travel to track and stop them. Footprints in the area, minus yours, of course, would help us determine what direction they traveled out of the camp.” They could also tell if the hole was made from the inside or outside of the fence line, but that was something he’d keep to himself. The fact that the bend of the wire and the direction of the cuts on the metal last night proved it was cut from inside

the camp was something he revealed to very few people. Mathias knew because Miller told him.

“I’ll let the night shift know when they come in. We’re just getting our assignments for this morning. We have to move the latrines on the west side, so we’ll need to dig. Collin, we’ll use the power auger to break ground. You’ve got experience running that temperamental fucking tractor, so make sure we don’t waste even an ounce of fuel, and if we hit shale again, for all that’s sane, another place for the latrines, we don’t want to hit another natural gas pocket.”

“You got it,” the man said, standing up.

“Natural gas?”

Mathias nodded. “Yeah, that caused a royal mess. The local government sent geologists and all kinds of survey teams. They told us where to dig from now on. We have a map. Make sure you take that with you, Hank.”

The man he spoke to stood and said, “You got it. Red team, you’re with me.”

“Shit,” one man said.

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“Literally.” Another laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. “At least we aren’t filling in the old holes today.”

Ronan chuckled as the men left. Mathias assigned the rest of his men’s duties and then turned to Ronan. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“A question,” Ronan said as they moved back to the front of the tent. “The cutting tools are left out all night?”

“Sure. But I account for everything.” Mathias looked at him and frowned. “Why?”

“Would you have the ability to lock them up?”

“Yeah, I could do that, but again, I ask why?”

Ronan rubbed his chin, which was now covered in a full beard. “Call it a preventive measure. Your night shift shouldn’t be working on the fence line at night, right?”

“Well, no. But I think you have more in mind than preventive measures. My brother-in-law is a retired detective. I recognize that look in your eyes. He knew things without actually knowing things, which doesn’t make sense until you meet the guy. You’re like him. You have ideas on what’s going on, don’t you?”

“Guilty,” Ronan admitted. “Help me determine whether I’m right or wrong and lock those up from now on when you leave?”

“You got it.” Mathias nodded. “Anyone could come in here and use them. Damn it. I

didn't even think about that." He shook his head. "I'll make sure of it," the man said with a conviction that Ronan couldn't doubt. "I hate that one of the people we are trying to help could be doing this to their own."

"The idea sucks. I'll get out of your hair. It sounds like you have a full day."

"Every day. I'm just about to make a pot of coffee. Would you like to join me?" Mathias offered.

"I'd like to. It was a long night, but I have things to do. Some other time?"

"Sure, my daughter sends it over, and I have a stockpile. She's a good girl and, currently, my favorite because her shipments before the convoy problems kept me in the good stuff even with the supply convoys stopped."

"Sounds like a plan," Ronan said as he lifted a hand and left the tent. Miller had picked the right person to talk to. Mathias seemed squared away, but someone wasn't. Someone was aiding the fuckwads outside the fence line.

CHAPTER 12

Ronan walked quietly down the small trail. It was dark, but the moon was full and illuminated the trail ahead of him. He saw Adil step out of the brush about ten feet in front of him. "Your man will watch your backtrail, yes?"

"Of course." Wraith always had his back. It was a given.

"Your uncle and his team are good men. They did a hard job."

"I didn't tell you he was my uncle." Ronan crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at the man.

“Of course, I made a few calls of my own today. A very old, dated satellite phone may have been left in my care. I’m sure you will understand I do not take things at face value.”

Ronan liked this guy. “I get it. What do you have for me?”

“Unfortunately, not a lot. I have asked my contacts for information, but from what I gather, the person inside the camp is protected. They have some value or potential value to the people using him.”

“Him?”

Adil nodded. “I do know that much. A man, a foreigner, who the ISIL is using to give them information on the convoys.” The ISIL was a militant fundamentalist group that reigned in waves of terror in the area.

“What did they gain from attacking the convoys?”

“The first convoy was attacked to take out one of the escorts. He was a threat to the man in the camp.”

“How do you know this?”

“I know who attacked the convoys.” Adil shrugged. “They were told to take whatever they wanted, but the man had to die.”

“And the rest of the convoys?”

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“Were to cover the first.” Adil shook his head. “The refugees were sold or given as gifts. The fuel, food, and medical supplies were sold on the black market. Each convoy provided over five years of money to the people who attacked the convoys. They look forward to the next.”

“The next one is in three days, going to Al-Tanf and returning with transport vehicles. It will be protected.”

“And you would like me to do what with this information?” Adil cocked his head.

“Tell the people you know who attacked the convoys. Let them know if they come for us, they will die. Guardian doesn’t play games.”

“This will not stop them when you move refugees again. Whether or not they’re told to attack the convoys, they will. The profit is too good.”

“How will they know which day we move the people?” Ronan put his hands on his hips and asked, “And why were all the convoys attacked on a Tuesday?”

Adil smiled. “Who is not working on Tuesdays? Who can leave the camp without anyone’s knowledge and place a call?”

“It sounds like you already know the answer.”

“I think I do, but you won’t like what I say.”

“Try me.” Ronan waited for Adil’s response. The one word out of the man’s mouth

hit him with the force of a freight train. “You’re sure?”

“Certainty is a moving target in this country. If part one and part two join together, the probability is very good that the two pieces join to equal one.”

Ronan stared at the tip of his boot. “I’m going to need proof.”

“That you will. I, however, am not in the business of providing proof, just information.” Adil sighed. “There are good people in the camp. Some have lost their lives trying to protect my countrymen and aid them. I ask myself, why this camp? Why is it going away? The other camps are not touched. What is so special about this camp? Why would someone want the camp gone?”

Ronan narrowed his eyes. “It’s bigger than just the convoys.”

Adil nodded. “The convoys are, how your uncle said, low fruit. Easy to pick. But the tree is much bigger with a wealth we can’t see, but somehow it is there. Yes, I believe it is much bigger than the convoys. There’s a lot of shale in this area, isn’t there?”

“And why would whoever it is want the camp gone? What does shale have to do with anything?”

“That I don’t know. Again, it is my speculation and suspicion, but the questions are worth asking, don’t you think?”

“Agreed. Do you have any way of validating your suspicions about the informant?”

Adil shook his head. “No. The protection of this man is from someone very powerful. I rarely run into roadblocks. My network is extensive and many, many years old. Trusted people with proven allegiances have told me not to inquire further. So, I watched. Five convoys, five trips out of the main gate. My speculation about his

identity is based on observation and a suspicious nature. Who he works for and why he's doing it need to be determined, and that is on you. I will, of course, provide any information I can."

"I'd like to provide you with something for the information you've already provided. What do you need?"

"A country that is not torn by war?"

Ronan gave a sad laugh. "Above my pay grade, my friend."

"Ah, well, then, how about a seat on the plane when you leave?"

Ronan blinked in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"I talked to your uncle about it. He will work the paper for you to bring me out." Adil shook his head. "I have to think of my future. I've learned English and how to read and write it. I want a chance to sleep without the fear of war. I am tired of being one step ahead to ensure I stay alive." Adil looked at him. "I am ancient, and yet I am only twenty-four."

Ronan could understand the exhaustion. He'd been on his own and working to survive since he was a teenager. "If the organization says yes, I'll ensure you come with us."

Adil smiled. "They will say yes. They offered me a job."

"Did they? Doing what?"

"Mapping the tunnel system in Aleppo and beyond." Adil smiled. "I could walk through them blindfolded."

“Are they where the women and children are being taken?”

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“Some. Most are taken to the ISIL as gifts for overlooking debts. They are also taken over the border to be sold as labor for the drug fields or to be used for sex.”

“How did you escape going to war or being sold?”

Adil looked up at him. “Who said I did?”

Ronan frowned. “You were a child soldier?”

“No.”

Ronan snapped his mouth shut and ground his teeth. Son of a bitch, he wished like hell he’d kept his mouth shut. “I’m sorry.”

“As am I. As I said, I am ancient. I’ve seen and experienced too much and am ready to leave. I will contact you if I have any information. It would be best if no one sees us together.”

“I understand. Thank you for the information.”

“You’re welcome—oh, and one more thing. Tell Buchanan not to meet the people Rana had contacted. They will kill her after they ...” He shrugged. “They are not the people Rana used to know.”

“I’ve already told her, but I’ll say it again. Thank you.”

“Good night,” Adil said as he returned to the brush and walked out of view.

Ronan headed back to the main road, and Wraith met him about a quarter of a mile up the trail. “Did you get the information?”

“I got it.” He repeated his conversation with Adil. Wraith was quiet until Jug met up with them.

“Everything good?”

“Not even close,” Wraith said.

“What does that mean?” Jug asked Ronan.

Ronan sighed, “It means there’s a traitor in our midst.”

“So, it’s a staff member,” Jug said.

“We believe we know who it is,” Ronan acknowledged.

“Then we take them out. No more worries.”

Jug was always a straightforward kind of guy. “We contact Guardian first, tell them what we know and assume, and they let us know what they want done.”

“Like there’s any question?” Jug turned to look at him as they walked.

“There is a question,” Wraith said quietly.

“What is it?” Jug asked.

“Who’s paying them, and why are they trying to close this specific camp.” Ronan sighed. “And you can’t say shit about this to Shelly.”

“What the fuck? Like I would?”

“Pillow talk,” Wraith said with humor in his voice.

“Ain’t been no pillows. Ain’t going to be any. She’s out of my league.”

“Not what I heard,” Wraith said. “She’s into you.”

“Stop pulling my leg, man. She’s a fucking doctor.”

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“And you’re a fucking good man, regardless of any perceived lack of education from your perspective,” Ronan said. “If you don’t make the move, it’s on you, Jug, but that woman is into you.”

Jug was quiet for the rest of the walk, which was fine with Ronan. They entered the camp through the side checkpoint, where Stryker was talking to the militia on duty. “How’s the perimeter?” he asked, knowing they hadn’t been doing a perimeter check.

“Secure,” Jug grumbled and trudged off toward the medical tent and presumably his cot. He and Wraith walked to their tent, and both dropped onto their respective cot. “Proving it will be tricky.”

“I know,” Ronan agreed with his friend, but he had a feeling they would have to get it done anyway. “I’ll call Uncle Jacob in the morning. I need a couple hours of sleep.”

“Ditto,” Wraith said and yawned. That was the last thing Ronan heard. Turning off his brain tonight wasn’t a problem. He closed his eyes, took in a four-second breath, and let it out as he shut his shit down.

CHAPTER 13

Fleur sat in the admin tent, waiting for Rana to return from her translation duties in Tammara’s group. There had been two people who’d come to the camp for shelter and food. The newest members of the camp had said it was being circulated that the camp was closed and wasn’t taking any more people. That rumor would stop women fleeing abusive relationships or those destitute from seeking shelter. That broke her heart. For four years, she’d battled to take care of and relocate countless refugees

from the fighting. Witnessing the hoards of people who'd once processed into the camp dry up to a trickle hurt to the point of feeling utterly defeated.

The small convoy of people going to Al-Tanftonight was preparing to depart. She'd packed a change of clothes and toiletries and given the small bag to Ronan that morning before relieving Rana. The events of the last months had scarred her. She couldn't deny it. From grief to anger to the stupidity of considering moving people by herself through the tunnel systems she didn't know and couldn't navigate, she sat at the small table and examined each of the phases she'd gone through. Thank God Ronan and Shelly had stopped her and made her see the foolishness of her plans.

Miller entered the tent and sat down in front of her. "Are you looking for refuge?" She smiled at him.

"More than you could believe." Miller sighed and rubbed his face. Leaning closer, he whispered, "Has Ronan said anything to you about who the person inside is? It's been three days since we found out."

Fleur glanced across the tent. The two women were working with the structure's representative and engrossed in their conversation. She shook her head. "I haven't seen much of him, but he hasn't said anything."

Miller leaned back and shook his head. "I guess I'm expecting a miracle."

Fleur sighed. "We all are, but hopefully, we can continue with the drawdown and close up shop."

Miller's head whipped her direction. "What? That's a change of tune for you, isn't it? You were the biggest proponent of keeping this camp open."

She nodded. "I'm tired, Miller. I'm going home after the camp shuts. It's time."

“Huh.” Miller blinked and looked at the floor. “Sorry to hear that. I really am.”

Fleur smiled at him. “Really? Why? It wasn’t like we were going to be assigned together again.”

He lifted his eyes and blinked at her. “What?”

“I asked why you’re sorry that I’m ready to go home.”

He shrugged the question away and said, “Oh, well, we’ve been through a lot. Thought you were digging in and wanting the camp to stay open.”

She shook her head. “Not anymore. Yeah, I made a loud stink about it in the beginning. Hell, I even attempted to find a way to get some of the people out via the tunnels.”

Miller frowned. “Did you give up that idea?”

She lifted a hand. “Yeah. I stopped the process. Ronan will get the convoys running again, and we’ll close. It might not be in two months, but hopefully, my security supervisor, who brought Guardian in, can get us more time to move everyone.”

“We need to move them as soon as possible.” Miller shook his head.

“We’re picking up transport vehicles tonight,” she reminded him.

“He’s taking all his team with him?”

“I think some will remain here. I’m not sure; I didn’t ask, but I assume he won’t leave the camp unattended.”

“No, probably not.” Miller stood up. “If I don’t see you before you leave, be safe.”

“Okay, thanks.” She leaned back in her chair and watched the man leave the tent. He was so damn stressed. She couldn’t imagine the pressures weighing him down.

Rana walked into the tent not much longer. Her face was tight with stress.

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“Are you all right?” Fleur asked.

“I am. The sessions are difficult.” She shrugged. “Tammara does miss some of the conversation, so it is best that I am there, but it is hard to hear even though I know things they talk about happen.”

“I can imagine.” Fleur put her hand on top of Rana’s. “Thank you so much for helping. It’ll only be for a few more months.”

Rana cocked her head. “So, the convoys will start again?”

“I believe so.” Fleur nodded. “When I think of how stupid I was.” She shook her head slowly. “Thank you for going to Shelly. I wasn’t thinking correctly.”

Rana smiled at her. “We have to take care of each other.”

“We do, indeed.” She stood up. “I need to go. If you need anything while I’m gone, let Miller know.”

“I will. I hope you don’t have any problems,” Rana said as they switched positions.

“I think Ronan will be able to handle anything that comes our way.” She waved at Rana then left the tent. She was looking forward to leaving the camp. It had been a long time since she’d driven a convoy vehicle and even longer since she’d left the camp for personal time in Turkey.

She wandered over to the Guardian tent and noticed the other drivers were gathered

there, too. When she approached, Ronan emerged from the tent. “All seven drivers are here?”

Wolf nodded. “We were just waiting on Fleur.”

“Then let’s go,” Ronan said as he started walking. “Fleur, with me. Everyone else in the transport with Wolf.” Fleur got into the Jeep’s passenger seat and glanced over at him. “Only two of you?”

“Nope.” He pointed up. “We have an eye in the sky that will let us know if we have any problems.”

She glanced up and then back at him. “Will they help you shoot if someone attacks us?”

Ronan let out a bark of laughter and tapped a box in the back seat. “We have more than enough firepower should someone decide to be stupid.”

She glanced back at the hard green plastic box. The yellow print on the top read MK-153 SMAW. She grabbed the Oh Shitbar on the Jeep when Ronan popped the clutch, and the Jeep jerked forward. “What is a SMAW?” she asked as they pulled out of the compound.

“Shoulder-launched multipurpose assault weapon,” Ronan said as he looked in the rearview mirror, waiting for Wolf to catch up to him.

“Assault weapon?” she asked as they increased speed.

“Think rocket.”

She craned her neck to look back at the box. “You have a rocket in there?”

“Six. Just in case.”

“Oh.” She threw her hands up in the air. “Like it’s totally natural to bring six rockets with you in a vehicle.”

He glanced over at her, his dark mirrored sunglasses reflecting her image as he smiled. “It is for us.”

She blinked at him and then laughed. “Of course, it is.”

“Where did you grow up?” Ronan asked after about five minutes of silence.

“Washington State.” She smiled. “It was a great childhood. Dad was the best. My mom died in childbirth with my little brother. He didn’t make it, either.” She shrugged. “So it was just my dad and me. We did all the outdoor things. We surfed, camped, went on hiking trips, and played about every sport you could think of. I went to college on a softball scholarship.”

“Softball? What position?”

“Designated player.” She glanced at him when she said it.

He did a double-take. “Is that an actual position?”

“It was for me. I can smack the hell out of a ball, but don’t ask me to catch anything. I’ll miss eleven times out of ten. I could have been used as a defensive player, but thankfully, my coach knew I was crap and only used me as a pinch hitter or runner.” She laughed. “What sport did you play?”

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“All of them,” Ronan said. “Baseball, basketball, football, lacrosse.”

“Which were you best at?”

Ronan shrugged. “I was okay at all of them.”

“Okay?”

He smiled at her. “Good.”

“Just good?” she egged him on a bit.

“Okay, I lettered in all of them and had three scholarship opportunities. Football, lacrosse, and baseball.”

She laughed. “Which one did you choose?”

“None. My brother and I went to the Air Force Academy and from there went to flight training.”

“You’re a pilot?”

“I am,” he admitted.

“What kind of planes did you fly?”

“Heavies.”

She blinked. “What is that?”

“Big planes. C-17. We had high enough picks to go for the fighters, but our family’s business, Guardian, uses transport planes on the regular, so we trained on the heavies. Deacon has his helicopter license, too.”

“You didn’t?”

He shook his head. “Flying isn’t my passion. Some people want to do nothing more than be in the sky. I’m not that guy. Neither is Deacon. We’d rather run a team, make an impact one mission at a time, not be a glorified taxi driver.”

“I never thought of a pilot that way.” She’d always romanticized the job, thinking how great it would be to be able to fly a plane.

“You would after a while. We did our required commitment for the academy and the flight training and then came to work for Guardian. The training to be a team member was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but advanced special operations aren’t for the weak or the untrained. Deacon lives for this. I’m dedicated, and the job is everything to me, but my brother is on another level with it. We decided to split up and make our way on different teams.”

“And you love what you do.” She knew he did.

“I do. I enjoy the teamwork. These guys are just as much my family as Deacon and my sisters. Closer at times.” He glanced over at her. “What about you? How did you get here?”

“Oh, wow. That’s a convoluted process.” She paused before continuing, “Dad passed when I was in college. It hit me hard, and the scholarship wasn’t enough to cover all the expenses. Dad used everything he had to pay the rest without telling me, of

course.”

“Of course,” Ronan said as he lifted his hand and placed it on hers. “I wouldn’t let my kid know if I was tight. I’d ensure they had everything they needed and deal with less.”

“Right? I realize that now, and that’s what he did. He took a second mortgage on the house, and I lost it because I didn’t have a way to make the payments. He had a small insurance policy, and I used that to bury him next to Mom and my baby brother, Ian.

“Anyway, I left school after my junior year and got a job working for a local construction company in project management. I used the school’s online program to finish my degree. Then, the company went bankrupt. It seems the owner and his wife lived way above their means. I had zero in the bank and ended up living on my cousin’s couch. I scoured the job openings and applied for everything I remotely qualified for, but there weren’t any offers and very few face-to-face interviews. That’s when I decided to look outside the United States. Nothing was keeping me there. I applied for a lot of different positions but was interviewed for the anti-trafficking position because it’s project management at the fundamental level. I run separate parts of the program and keep everyone accountable. That’s why I was reprimanded so severely when I went out after displaced people instead of waiting for them to come to us. I have a law enforcement title with no training or enforcement ability, but I have the desire to do the right thing for the right reasons.”

“Would you want to do project management in the States?” Ronan asked after they rumbled over part of the road that rattled the fillings in her teeth.

“I don’t know.” She gazed out at the emptiness and shook her head. “I have a substantial savings now. I think I’ll see if I can camp on my cousin’s couch again and look around since I don’t have an apartment. My goal when I came over here was to make a difference and, of course, receive a paycheck. Ninety percent of my pay has

been shoved into savings for the last four years.”

“Keep in mind that Guardian is always hiring people with experience.”

“Yeah, at war stuff, right?”

Ronan barked out a laugh. “We’re primarily an investigative agency. Domestic Operations is our bread and butter. Our investigations branch is huge and has branches in almost every state. Overseas ops, which I’m a part of, is a small arm we’ve kept alive because of situations such as the IDP camps. Usually, we go in, do our jobs, and get out.”

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That sounded ominous unless ... “You mean, like rescue missions?”

“Sometimes. Other times, we go after bad actors or squelch a situation before it becomes an international problem. There are various scenarios, but we always work within the confines of our charter, which was drafted and approved by POTUS.”

She frowned. “What’s a POTUS?”

“An acronym for the President of the United States.”

“Oh.” She lifted her eyebrows. “Dang, the president, huh? That’s pretty impressive.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Ronan smiled. “I don’t usually think much about what has happened to get the company to where it is now. There’s a lot of history in the foundation of Guardian. Someday, I’ll have to ask my father about it. The pieces I do know have made an indelible impression on me.”

And that was probably why he loved what he was doing. She wished her passion was as firmly entrenched as his. She thought she’d found that passion working with the IDPs, but lately, she’d been questioning everything. “Growing any company into an international success would be pretty difficult. Only the truly dedicated would succeed.” She gazed out across the countryside. She was dedicated to the people they served in the camp, but she wasn’t sure she was making any significant impact.

Ronan flicked his hand to his ear. “Go ahead.”

He glanced at her and then to the rearview mirror. “How long?”

“Got it.” He put on the brakes and brought the vehicle to a stop. The truck behind him pulled up beside them, and Wolf got out. Ronan looked at her and pointed to the truck. “Go get in the back of the truck with everyone else and tell them to get down as low to the truck's frame as possible. Keep quiet and do not come out no matter what.”

“Is there trouble?”

Ronan smiled grimly. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

CHAPTER 14

Ronan grabbed the crate as soon as he ensured Fleur was in the truck. “Where are they?”

“You’ll see them soon. They’re coming up on your six,” Dude said as they worked to pull the MK-153 SMAW and two rounds out of the box. They’d fitted the crate with six rockets, three dual-mode, and three anti-armor rockets.

“Dual?” Wolf asked as Ronan pulled out the reusable SMAW launcher.

“Dude, any armor in that incoming convoy?”

“Negative. Ragtag. Trucks, a van, and looks like a Jeep.”

“Dual,” Ronan said and assembled the launcher when Wolf handed him the missile.

“You told them not to show their faces.” Wolf shook his head. “Stupid.”

“Might not be Al’s people.” Ronan walked ten paces behind the truck and knelt. He flipped the cover off the optical sight and aligned the optics. “There they are,” Ronan

said, aligning his sights with the incoming vehicles.

“Warning shot?” Wolf asked.

“Unfortunately.” Ronan couldn’t care less if the bastards ate lead, but that wasn’t the correct way to do business. Check that. He cared, just not for the fuckers who tried to profit off innocent lives. He braced and pulled the trigger.

The igniter's sound lasted a fraction of a second before the propellant shot the explosive out of the tube and into the air toward the incoming danger.

The explosion cratered the road, and a plume of dirt obscured the vehicles. “They’re scattering, boss.” Dude chuckled. “Waiting to see if they’ll regroup and go after you again.”

Ronan stood up and nodded at Wolf, who handed him another charge. It took a minute to change the spent rocket for a new encased one, but he was ready and on his knee before Dude said, “They’re thinking about it.”

“We can see them.” Ronan watched the vehicles through the scope of the weapon.

“Two are circling, and yeah, they’re idiots. They’re trying to flank you to your west.” Wolf grabbed the other reusable SMAW launcher, the last dual-mode rocket, and an anti-armor rocket at Dude's warning. He sprinted west and up a slight embankment. “Ready.”

“Your vehicles are moving, Skipper.”

“I see them.”

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“Taking them out this time?” Wolf asked rather sarcastically.

“Damn straight.” Ronan had done his due diligence and warned the fuckers. “Two-hundred fifty meters. I don’t want them close enough to take a shot at our cargo.”

“Copy,” Wolf replied.

“Are any vehicles not coming?” Ronan asked, waiting as the vehicles on the road behind them raced toward them.

“One,” Dude answered.

“Only smart motherfucker in the group,” Wolf said what Ronan was thinking. “I have my targets. They’re coming in linear. I’ll hit between them and hopefully take out both.”

“Do what you have to do.” Ronan knew Wolf could handle two vehicles.

“Target in range,” Ronan said as he waited. Another hundred meters ... and there. He pulled the trigger and concentrated down range as the missile exploded the first vehicle. The one behind the first veered and then rolled. Ronan stood up and watched for any signs of movement.

“And we have a winner. The Jeep is inbound, Skipper.” Ronan put down the spent SMAW and returned to his vehicle to extract his M-4. The sound of an explosion made him look up for a nanosecond as Wolf launched his missile. “Two for the price of one?” Dude chuckled.

“Nope,” Wolf replied. “The other truck is still moving.”

“He’s tucking his tail,” Dude countered. “Skipper, the Jeep is slowing down. Looks like there are two survivors. The Jeep is picking them up.”

Ronan walked over to assume his prior position. “Yeah, they’re leaving,” Dude confirmed. “You’re clear.”

“Got it.”

He tapped the side of the personnel carrier. “Fleur, let’s go.”

“Coming.” She opened the tarp in the back and dropped down before she looked toward the smoldering vehicles. “Not what they expected.” She looked up at him. “We couldn’t fight back.”

“We aren’t fighting back; we’re taking the fight to them, and they damn well better not forget it.” He put the launcher into the crate and waited for Wolf to toss him his. The extra missile was carefully placed into the crate before it was secured. “Let’s go.”

“If you’re waiting on me, you’re backing up,” Wolf said, jogging to the carrier. His man pulled the tarp back and jumped up on the hitch. “Everyone okay in here?”

Ronan didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, he fired up the Jeep and put it into gear.

“Do you think they’ll come back?”

Ronan shook his head. “No.” Not without a lot more firepower. He wanted to fucking kiss his brother for including two crates of SMAWs in their Guardian-issued supplies. “If they try again, it will be on the way back.”

“Well, that’s not good.” Fleur’s eyes were huge. “We’re going to be more spread out and a bigger target.”

Ronan chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. They were trying to pick low-hanging fruit. They were used to anything coming out of the camp to be defenseless. They know now that isn’t the case.”

Fleur was quiet for a moment. “Do you ever wonder if what you did was right?”

He glanced at her. “You mean taking out those trucks?”

“Things like that, yeah.”

She looked at him, and even from behind his shaded lenses, he could tell she needed an honest answer, that the question was important to her. He lifted a shoulder. “Not anymore. When I first started, I questioned everything. I was learning. Now, I know that each of my team is exceptional, and they don’t make mistakes, especially when putting lives in danger. We fired a warning shot. That should have been enough to stop people who didn’t have ill intent. These guys split up and tried to flank us as two vehicles came at full speed at us. So, no, I don’t worry anymore.”

She nodded. “That makes sense. But why do you think they attacked us? It wasn’t like we had anything.”

Ronan glanced at her. “I wondered the same thing. I assumed we would be hit on the way back if attacked since supplies, fuel, and six new transport vehicles would be a reason to come after us.” He’d also had Adil put out the word not to attack them anymore. They’d played every card they had, but still, the bastards had tried to hit them. Why?

“What’s Al-Tanf Garrison like?”

“Sandy.” He laughed. “Seriously, the security walls are made of sand. Massive bunkers of sand. Some huts serve as barracks, and others, the larger ones, operate as facilities for those working there. Oh, there’s a hamburger fast food joint there. The one with the golden arches.”

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“Shut the hell up!” She swung sideways in her seat. “Are you teasing me, or is a Mickey D’s there?”

“It’s a wood building about ten feet long and five feet wide. It has a variegated tin roof and a menu with pictures and everything across the front. You walk up two steps, place your order, and pay then collect it at the next window. Of course, it has like five things, and it’s expensive as hell, but yeah, there is one. It might still be open when we get there.”

“Oh, man, I hope it is. I need to buy some to bring back to Shelly. We’ve been so hungry for a burger and fries.”

“It would be kind of old by the time you get back to camp.” He made a face at her. The thought of a day-old burger wasn’t high on his list of things he’d want to eat.

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. If she came, and there was a Mickey’s, and she didn’t buy me a burger and fries, I would cry real tears. I’ll bring it back for her.”

“I’ll see if we can find a cooler.”

Leaning over, Fleur kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

He glanced at her and then in the rearview mirror. The smile on Wolf’s face was about three feet wide. Whatever. He put his hand out, and she took it. Folding it into his, he wondered how he’d found such a person in the middle of a war zone.

Three hours later, they pulled into Al-Tanf Garrison. Ronan left Wolf to find the

drivers' bunks. He then took Fleur to the logistics warehouse and checked on the equipment and supplies that were supposed to be waiting for them.

“We have everything,” a staff sergeant told him. “The trucks will be fueled in the morning. I have the manifest for the equipment and supplies.” He handed it to Ronan. “We’ll load it together so you can ensure you’ve got what was requested.”

“Perfect. What time?” He handed the clipboard back. “I have the list from my organization.” Not that he didn’t trust, but trust and verify was a way of life if you wanted to stay alive.

“I’m here at zero-five hundred. Any time after that.” The man put his clipboard back on the wall.

“I’ll see you then.” Ronan shook the man’s hand and escorted Fleur out of the building and to the right.

“I can smell it!” She hopped excitedly. They turned the corner, and she did a little dance. “Thank you!”

She ran up the steps to the first window and backed away at the flurry of Arabic spat in her direction. Ronan was behind her in an instant. “What’s the problem?” he demanded.

“I won’t serve her,” the man flung back in English.

Ronan cocked his head and looked over his shoulder at Fleur. “Then you’ll serve me. I want four of everything.” He figured the other drivers would want some, too.

The man glared at Fleur. “She is disrespecting you and me, showing her hair and body.”

Ronan crossed his arms over his chest. “Keep your eyes to yourself, and there will be no disrespect. She’s American, and she’s welcome on this base, and she’s dressed appropriately.”

“But not in this country,” the man seethed.

Ronan paid for the food and corrected the man when he made a mistake in making change. That earned him another scathing look. Ronan kept his eyes on the worker as he made the food. He didn’t want to find a wad of spit in one of the burgers.

Fleur came up behind him. “Thank you. I’d forgotten for a minute where I was.”

“You’re on a US base. You didn’t forget. He did. And I’ll make sure his supervisors know.” Not that anything would be done. He took the four bags of food, and they walked down the stairs. The man’s muttered threat toward Fleur was loud enough for him to hear. Ronan turned around and, in perfect Arabic, said, “Enjoy your last day working on base.”

The man bared his teeth in response. “Here, take this.” He handed the bags to Fleur and hit his comms. “Dude, I have a project for you.” He explained what had just happened and asked Dude to handle the situation. Dude would know what he meant by that request. Ronan rarely asked his operator to handle this type of work, but when he did, the man never disappointed.

“You got it, Skipper,” Dude replied, and Ronan could hear the keyboard clacking as Dude started the process.

They found the other drivers, who nearly attacked them for a burger. He tossed a bag to Wolf, and after everyone, including himself, had devoured a hamburger and fries, they split up again. He took Fleur to billeting with him, and they scored a private hut. As they passed by the Jeep, he grabbed their bags, and they made their way to their

billets for the night.

He opened the door, and she sighed as she walked in. “Air conditioning. Oh, look! A fridge!” She walked straight to the small dorm-sized fridge and put the leftover burgers in it before she spun around and stopped. “A shower!” Fleur flew to the bathroom, which was tiny, and then spun around to him. She picked up a small black object, and her eyes grew wide. “A blow dryer!” She squealed and then laughed that rich, vibrant laugh of hers. “If I’m sleeping, don’t wake me up.”

He walked over to her and pulled her against him. “I’m afraid you might not get too much sleep tonight.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into him. “Maybe we should go to bed early. You know, get a jump on that sleep.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea. But we should shower first.” He glanced at the size of the shower. “Unfortunately, that would be an individual task. Might squeeze in there, but both of us. Doubtful.”

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She glanced over her shoulder and sighed. “That is unfortunate.” She turned back to him. “Maybe we could shower later.”

“Are you sure? We’re both covered in dust.” He started walking her toward the bed.

“What’s a little dust going to hurt?” She sighed when he lowered to her lips, and that fucking sexy sigh broke any thought about being a gentleman. Showers be damned.

He took her kiss and then consumed her. His hands traveled up her back to her face, and he cupped her head, turning her a bit so he could taste her. The cataclysmic explosion of chemistry between them ignited faster than the shoulder-fired missiles that morning. The feel of her tight body against him, her taste and smell as he moved his hand around the back of her head, pulsed through his body. Every cell cried out for more. More of Fleur. He found the bottom of her t-shirt and lifted it. She raised her hands over her head, and he broke the kiss long enough to tug the cotton off. Lacecovered her breasts. He kissed his way down her neck, cupping her full breasts in his hands, rolling her erect nipples with his fingers. She shivered and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him down—as if he was going anywhere else.

Her hands pulled at his uniform shirt. He didn’t bother to unbutton the fucker. Breaking away from her, he pulled it off, yanking the rolled sleeves off from where they were tight against his biceps. “All of it,” she said as she grabbed his belt buckle and pushed his t-shirt up. He grabbed her hands and lifted them over her head. “Slower, I want to experience all of you first.”

“Slower later.” She leaned forward, her lace-covered breasts pressed against his chest. “I’ve waited. We’ve waited. Slow is for later.” She licked his neck and then

sucked the skin into her mouth. Holy fuck. His cock was on board with her words.

He let her hands go, and she grabbed his belt, opening it and then unfastening the buttons of his uniform pants. Her hand grabbed his cock, and the fucker jumped, the sensation damn near the perfect storm. But he wasn't going to come. Not until he was in her. She pushed down his pants and dropped to her knees. "Oh, fuck." He slammed his eyes shut and then opened them just as quickly. He wanted to see her suck him, and damn, the visual of her lips sliding off his cock was the sexiest thing he'd seen in ages. She swirled her tongue around his cockhead and then looked up. A smile spread across her lips before she fucking deepthroated him. His hips moved forward before he caught himself, and she gagged but didn't back off. She grabbed the back of his thighs and invited him to fuck her throat. He held her head as he moved his hips in and out of her mouth, giving her a chance to breathe, but she moved forward, pushing his cock into her throat. He dropped his head back and thrust, once, twice, God, three times before he withdrew and let her breathe. Fuck, he'd died and gone to heaven. She grabbed his cock with her hand and worked it as she sucked and licked. He had to stop her, or he'd cum down her throat. "Babe, you have to stop." He moved away from her, but she groaned and followed him. "Cum in my mouth." She looked up at him. "Let me suck you when you lose it. I want it." She sucked his cock back into her mouth and then scraped the bottom of his cock with her teeth. Not enough to hurt, but enough to send him into a blowjob coma.

Fucking hell.

She was beyond fantastic. The perfect combination of spit, teeth, suction, and throat to drive him fucking insane. He was so close. Her fingers trailed over his balls and then grabbed them. She sucked him to the back of her throat and pulled gently on his balls. Explosions of red and white burst behind his closed eyes as the pool of cum in his balls ripped through his cock, and he exploded. He heard her gag and tried to pull out of her mouth, but she held his thighs tight. Wave after wave of him shot down her throat. She finally let him go, and he pulled back and widened his stance so he didn't

fucking face-plant. All the blood in his body was at the wrong part of his body, and yeah, he was dizzy. He grabbed her shoulders, bending a bit as he opened his eyes.

Jesus, the sight in front of him. Fleur's mouth was swollen and red. A dribble of cum trailed down her chin. He managed to drop to his knees and kiss her. He swept the inside of her mouth with his tongue, tasting himself against her delicate flavor. She surrendered to his kiss, and son of a bitch, after such an aggressive blowjob, her submission was hotter than hell. He broke the kiss and stared down at her. "That was the hottest thing anyone has ever done to me."

She smiled and licked her lips, and his eyes were transfixed on that talented tongue.

"Minx," he growled as she bit her bottom lip, rolling it before her tongue peeked out again.

She laughed. "Shower time."

"No way in hell." He would make her scream his name. Everyone in camp would know she was his and his alone. Claiming her was his goal, not a fucking shower. He wanted inside her, and he wanted her to lose her mind. Being the best she'd ever had was the number one thing on his mind because, fuck him six ways to Sunday, she'd given him the best head he'd ever had. He lowered for a kiss, but she touched his lips with her fingertips. "Consider the logistics."

What? "Logistics?" He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

She leaned to the side and looked at his feet. "We're wearing combat boots." She laughed. "We shower, and then I want you to fuck me until I'm boneless. Then, when we recover, I want to ride your massive cock. It choked me so good."

"Jesus, your mouth." He dropped for another kiss. He'd never had a woman tell him

what she wanted. It was a massive turn-on. She pulled away. “Showers, then we don’t leave that bed until zero five hundred hours.”

“Save my sanity and shower fast.” He let her go, watched her grab her small bag, and go into the bathroom.

As she shut the door, a thought crossed his mind. One he didn’t want to swat away because it was the absolute truth.

She’s the one.

CHAPTER 15

Fleur luxuriated in the hot shower but didn’t linger. Washing her hair and body, she smiled at the memory of what they’d just done. She knew she was adventurous when it came to sex. She liked to say things. Her last boyfriend had hated it. He hadn’t wanted to know what she’d wanted, what she’d needed. They’d been completely incompatible in bed, and the relationship had lasted a couple of months longer than it should have. But it was who she was, and she wanted to let Ronan see the real her. He had, and from his response, he loved it as much as she did.

She turned off the shower and toweled off before opening her bag. She didn’t have any sexy lingerie, but she did have a pair of boy-short panties and a tight tank top. It was as sexy as she could get in a war zone. She combed out her hair, which took almost as long as the shower, then grabbed the hair dryer and her bag before walking out into the private hut.

Ronan stood from where he’d been sitting, wearing nothing but boxer briefs. She let her eyes roam over his body. He was muscled, and his wide shoulders narrowed to a flat stomach. His chest hair traveled past the waistband of his navy-blue briefs. That perfect cock was semi-erect. Leaning against the doorjamb, she sighed. “What did I

do to deserve someone as sexy as you?”

A rakish smile spread across his face, and he prowled across the floor. Yes, he prowled. It wasn't a walk. It was that cock-sure male advancement that told her that if she weren't his, he'd make her his with one kiss. She smiled at the thought. He'd already done that, hadn't he?

He cupped her neck and stared down at her. “You are so fucking sexy.” He dropped and almost kissed her. “Shower time,” he said and moved past her, giving her a gentle push so he could shut the bathroom door. His laughter in the bathroom echoed hers. God, it was so nice to have fun, to be herself, and not to worry for others, even if it was just for an evening.

She plugged in the hair dryer and let the hot air dry her hair. It was so thick that it wouldn't be dry by the time Ronan was finished in the shower, but the familiar act was soothing and a bit of home she'd missed. She closed her eyes and, as she dried her hair, considered what she would do when she returned to the States. She would love to see Ronan, but that seemed improbable, and she needed to stop thinking that way. This was a limited run, which hurt a bit because, if she let herself, she could easily fall for the man. He was interesting. His humor matched hers. But he was destined for bigger things than she was. He was part of an international business that he would one day manage. She was a nobody project manager who'd been reprimanded for putting people in danger. That was going to look good on her résumé, wasn't it? She smiled and laughed quietly. If she didn't laugh at her mistakes, she'd end up crying. She'd made so many wrong turns in this job, but she cared about the people who passed through the gates.

The light of the bathroom door opening caught her attention, and as he walked out completely naked, she lowered the hair dryer and turned it off. “Damn.” She smiled. “Time for sex.”

He laughed as he walked over to the bed and took her brush and the hair dryer and put them on the nightstand. He loomed over her, and she fell backward onto the pillows. Then he crawled over the top of her. “This goes.” He tugged on her tank top. She wiggled until she was able to get out of it, and his eyes traveled her body. She was thinner than she used to be, but she knew she had an okay body, and she wasn’t shy. His fingers trailed from her shoulder, over her breast, down her stomach, to her panties. Snapping the elastic, he looked back up at her. “If you want these to survive, take them off.”

She lifted an eyebrow in challenge. “No.”

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Ronan grabbed the elastic in both hands, and his chest and arms muscles flexed. The material stood no chance, and it ripped. He slid the remnant down her legs and held it up. He gave her that rakish, sexy, curled-lip expression and said, “Never challenge me.”

“I’ll always challenge you.” She smiled back at him. “And you love it.”

“Fuck yeah, I do.” Lowering, he took one of her nipples in his mouth, and she slammed her eyes shut and arched into him. His fingers traveled her as his mouth did insane things to her breasts. She felt her sex heat. She was wet when he finally spread her and found her clit. He barely touched her, and the groan that came from her was from somewhere so deep she couldn’t stop it.

Two fingers dipped inside her. “You’re ready for me,” he whispered against her shoulder.

“I have been for days.” And that was the truth. She wanted his cock inside her with a desperation she hadn’t felt before.

He lifted his fingers to his mouth and sucked them.

“Jesus.” She arched harder, tightening her hips and legs in search of some kind of relief. “Make me come, Ronan.”

He reached over to the bedside drawer and pulled out a strip of condoms. She couldn’t help the laugh. “Think we’re going to need all those?”

“Damn straight.” He lifted to his knees, suiting up while she watched, and she spread her legs a bit wider and accepted him as he lowered. Only he didn’t do what she expected. Instead, he kissed the nipple of each breast tenderly and then trailed almost-there kisses down her stomach, stopping to kiss each hipbone. He made room for his shoulders, wrapped his arms around her legs, and spread her open. He licked along the side of her clit. Not enough pressure and too much sensation all at once. She tried to arch up into his mouth, but his arms kept her pinned to the bed. “My turn.” His whispered words were as much of a threat as they were a promise. She rode the sensation of his touches and tongue as the firestorm brewing in her core grew.

She tensed her legs and stomach as he licked and finger fucked her, but it wasn’t enough, and his low rumbling laughter told her he knew it. He’d bring her right to the edge and then slow his attentions. She grabbed the sheets and pulled on them as she begged for release. “Let me come.” He edged her for what seemed like hours. She was sweating and ached for release. “Please.” She needed relief from the swelling need.

“Not yet,” Ronan said as he slowed again.

“Ronan,” she groaned and then begged, “Please, I ache. I need you so much.”

He released her and crawled up her body, sliding his tongue over her skin, kissing and nipping as he moved over her. He wrapped his arms under her and held her head with his hands as he slowly entered her.

“Yes.” She sighed as his cock slid inside her. She wrapped her legs around him. There was no way in hell she’d let him move away from her. His strokes were slow and gentle, not at all what she wanted or needed. “More.” She arched under him, but nothing would make him go faster. The build-up was frustrating and so damn good. Her body inched closer and closer to release. Her breath and his synched as they shared the same air. His intense gaze held hers, and she was his willing captive.

Releasing the sheets from her death grip, she slid her hands over his arms and to his back. He was so strong, so solid, and he was hers, at least for a short time. She lifted for a kiss, and when his lips closed over hers, she felt him thrust deeper and faster. The kiss, an intense, passionate, erotic connection, flamed the torrent of heat, and she felt herself tighten. She broke the kiss and shouted his name as she exploded. He held her tight and finished right after she did.

Fleur gasped for air as she tightened again, and her body gripped him. She'd never experienced anything like the sex they'd just had. His head was on her shoulder, and every huff of air from him fanned her heated skin. How was it possible that she'd never known how good sex could be? She pulled her fingers through his thick brown hair. "You broke me."

He lifted his head. "In a good way or bad way?"

"Good. Great. Better than great." She waved her hand then dropped it on his back. "God, do that again, and you'll never get rid of me."

"Promises, promises," Ronan said as he rolled to his side and took care of the condom. When he was back in bed, she snuggled next to his chest. "I've never had a lover edge me before. I hated it, but I loved it, too."

"Intensity," he said as he played with her hair. The snarls in it would take forever to comb out, but she couldn't find it in her to care.

"That sums up our relationship," she quipped, but the word did, in fact, sum up what had happened between them.

"That isn't a bad thing." He kissed the top of her head.

"I didn't say it was. As a matter of fact, it's probably the best thing that has ever

happened to me.” She snuggled closer because she’d put herself out there with that comment. She wanted him to know he was the best she ever had.

He pulled her closer and wrapped her in his strong arms. “I have a problem.”

She jerked backward to look at him. “What?”

“Whatever this is between us is too good to walkaway from.” His stare held no ridicule, no humor, nothing but honesty.

She smiled at him. “Oh. That’s a problem we share, then. I thought I was being stupid or sex-addled brain-dead, but you’re right. This is something ... special.”

He pulled her closer again. “Get some sleep, cowgirl. We have a rodeo to attend, and I want to watch the entire event.”

She chuckled. “Ye-haw.” But the yawn that followed was real, and she snuggled into the man who had just taken her to the stars and back. He was right. She was in trouble because the feelings that grew inside her heart were strong. So damn strong.

CHAPTER 16

Ronan avoided Wolf’s knowing smile. They were late to logistics—an hour late. Not that it mattered. Wolf had taken the bull by the horns and loaded the supplies with the help of the personnel assigned to Al-Tanf. The only hiccup came when the tents were counted. Three of the large tents were missing. While Wolf and the staff sergeant headed to the warehouse to locate them, he sent Fleur and the drivers to the mess tent to grab some food. He tapped his comm device. “Dude, can you patch me through to Gabby?”

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“Yep. Hold on.”

It took several minutes, but Gabby came on the line. “Ronan, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Why?”

“Because you and Deacon don’t call unless it’s an emergency.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh, really? When was the last time you called me?”

Ronan thought back and then lifted his eyebrows. “Okay, point taken. This isn’t an emergency. I have a question for you.”

“Oh, hold on, let me sit down. My younger brother asks me a question instead of telling me what to do.”

“I’ll hang up.” Ronan had another sister he could call, several aunts and uncles, and even his dad.

“No, no, I was just playing. What do you have?”

“Are there any job opportunities near headquarters for a project management specialist?”

“Within Guardian?” Gabby asked.

“Preferably, yes,” Ronan admitted.

“I can see. We still run all our open positions through Rio North in Savannah, but I can message him and find out if we have any openings a project manager could fill. What’s this guy’s name?”

“Fleur Buchanan.” Ronan waited for the reaction ... but there was nothing. “Hello?”

“Ah, yeah, I’m here. Fleur as in a woman?”

“All woman, yep.” Ronan lifted his eyebrows and waited. He expected a thousand questions, but all he got was silence. “Gabby, are you there?”

“Yep. Working on that message. By the way, you know there’s a move afoot to get you and Deacon back to the mountain.”

“I know. I’m not ready ... yet. I need to sort a few things out first.”

“Like?” Gabby finally asked.

“Like whether or not we can find a job for Fleur in Colorado.”

“And that would make or break you coming into the fold?”

“At this point, it is a concern.” He wanted to ensure he and Fleur had a chance, and being away from her for the time his team deployed wouldn’t help. Leaving his team sucked fucking donkey balls. He knew it would happen eventually. Eventually. He was getting attached to Fleur. He was truthful with her last night. He didn’t want to walk away from her. But he didn’t want to walk away from his team either.

“Do you know if she has a clearance?”

“Doubtful. She’s working for Children’s Hope International in Syria, so she at least has a background check and probably a host nation check, too.”

“Does she have a degree?” Gabby was professional, much more so than he thought she would be.

“In project management, yes, but I’m not sure of the school.”

“Con can find all that out. When will she be available?”

“When our mission ends and the camp is shuttered.” Ronan couldn’t wait to move the IDFs and get the staff packed and loaded.

“Shuttered? Why are they closing a camp when the IDP numbers are growing?” Gabby worked with their mom on the charities Guardian supported, so she’d know about the IDP crisis.

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“I couldn’t tell you. I think Miller, the lead at the camp, said it was a consolidation of personnel to save money.”

Gabby was silent for a minute. “Ronan, that doesn’t make sense. I’ve been to countless meetings dealing with the overflow of IDPs out of the country, and all the neighboring nations are putting a halt or throttling the flow of people into their country. There’s a bid to build more camps, not shutter them. Is it because of how dangerous the area is? The convoy attacks?”

Ronan glanced around. “I’m not in a secure facility, but ... hold on, let me go to the comms center. Others might want to hear what I’ve found out.”

“I’ll get them online,” Gabby said, and the call was disconnected. Ronan tapped his earpiece again. “Wolf, I’m heading to the comms building.”

“Roger,” Wolf said, straining. “We found the tents. Fuckers are heavy.”

Ronan laughed and shook his head as he headed across the small base to the communications building. Signing in, he found himself in the broom closet again. Would it kill these guys to extend the room just a bit?

He waited for the call to go through and smiled as Gabby and Charley waved at him. “Hey, girlyes.”

Archangel appeared on the screen along with Alpha. “You have some information?” Archangel was always on topic.

Ronan nodded. "I do. First, someone inside the camp is aiding the poachers."

"Poachers?" Gabby asked.

Ronan glanced at Charley. "People who take unaccompanied girls and women from the camp. By force, if necessary."

Charley's mouth dropped open. "Someone inside the camp? Motherfucker. Jace, I'm flying to Syria."

"No, you're not," Jason and Gabby said at the same time. It was rather comical. Jason shook his head and said, "Continue."

Charley narrowed her gaze at both of them but didn't say anything. He flicked his eyes to the grid with Jacob in it. "Al said it was someone on the staff. He didn't know who. I don't have evidence yet on who it could be. Also, Al is suspicious of who's informing the local radicals about the convoys. He believes the first convoy was hit to take out a man who knew what was happening. All other convoys have been hit as cover."

"What about the other six times?" Jacob asked.

"Wait, who the hell is Al?" Charley butted in.

"A covert source that has helped us numerous times," Jacob said, leaning forward.

"What did he say?"

"He asked me who was not on duty on Tuesdays. Who would not raise suspicion if they left the camp during the day? I ran it against the duty rosters I'd asked for due to an entirely different reason, but his speculation was correct. The person he believes is informing the factions does not work on Tuesday, and if they left the camp, there

wouldn't be any questions. However, some other people are also not on duty on Tuesdays, so it isn't a slam dunk."

"Who?" Archangel growled the word.

Ronan stared at the CEO and told him who Al believed was responsible.

"Why?" Gabby asked. "Why would someone do something like this?"

"A good question, and Al mentioned shale in the area. It was a random as fuck comment, so I think he was trying to tell me something without actually telling me something."

"Shale like the rock?" Con's voice came over the connection.

"Yes, but listen, when I was in the structures tent, Mathias told the guys digging a new latrine trench to find a new location if they hit shale again. They didn't want to hit another natural gas pocket. The host nation gave them a map of safe places to dig."

"Okay, I found the host national report on the natural gas incident. I'll send it to Dude. Do you want me to run the financials on this person and the other individuals Ronan has identified?"

"No, Dude and Tink are my team. Let them do that." He protected his operators the same way he protected his team. They were more than capable enough of doing the work.

"Touchy, okay." Con chuckled.

"No, I'm not. But my team is fantastic. I have a working relationship with them, and

I'm sure you have more than enough on your plate.”

“True. But I'm the best,” Con said.

“Yes, dear.” Gabby smiled as she agreed with Con.

“See, she believes me.”

“Con, can we get back on topic?” Jason took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Oh, sure. Go ahead.” Jason’s sarcasm was completely lost on the guy. Gabby had her hands full with that man.

“I’m not willing to accuse anyone based on hunches and without proof. Get your operators on the money trail. As a matter of fact, I want detailed financials on everyone in that camp. If we find out someone is being paid to set up innocents, we will take action. Until then, we wait and watch.”

“I have transport vehicles now, and we’re heading back to camp. I’ll schedule the next convoy for the following Tuesday.”

“Do you have the equipment to repel an attack?”

“He does now.” Jacob chuckled.

“I do, indeed.” Ronan smiled. “And I’ll have eyes in the camp to watch our primary suspect.”

“Trustworthy?” Jason asked.

“I’d trust her with my life,” Ronan replied.

Jason blinked. “Really?”

Ronan nodded. “Her name is Fleur Buchanan. Have Con run her and check her out. She’s solid.”

“Oh, goodie. Something to do,” Con interjected.

“Ronan wants to bring her to Colorado as a project manager. I’m checking with Rio to see if we have any openings.”

Jason put his glasses back on. “If we don’t, we will. Family takes care of family. We’ll need to check on her clearance, and if she doesn’t have one, we need to initiate one.”

“I’ve got that on my list.” Gabby smiled across the table at Jason.

“Good.” Jason looked up at the monitor. “Ronan, does that mean you’ll be interested in returning and inheriting a desk?”

“She would be the reason I did.” That was the honest-to-God truth.

Jason shook his head. “A solid relationship is good, but make sure you’re ready. You don’t want to resent making the move.”

“Thanks, Uncle Jason. I know eventually I’ll take one of those desks, and I accept that. Guardian is Dad’s legacy to us and your children, too. And if I’m honest, the business end of the machine is calling me. I know Wraith can handle the team, and I don’t doubt for a minute he’d be a fantastic team leader. That’s why he’s my second in command over some of the older guys. Anyway, I’m working things out. I’ll let you know.”

“Good. Have Dude start a management update and put us all in the loop.”

“Will do.” Ronan was set to punch the disconnect button when his Uncle Jacob stopped him.

“Deacon will be available in about ten minutes. They’re just coming out of debrief.”

“Thanks.” He’d like to talk to his brother. He glanced at his watch and saw he had about fifteen minutes to spare. They signed off, and once again, Ronan unwedged his ass from the broom closet that substituted as a secure communications facility and went through the process of exiting the facility. By the time he got out, he figured Deacon would be free. He opened his cell and hit Deacon’s picture.

“Dude, how did you know?”

“Uncle Jacob.” Ronan laughed. “How was the mission?”

“Quick, in and out. Nothing surprising. How was yours?”

“I’m still working it, currently in Al-Tanf resupplying.”

“I thought you were supposed to get those people out and leave.”

“Nope. We’re doing IDF security until they can be relocated and then shuttering the camp. Two or three months.”

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“Damn. That sucks.”

“No, not really.” Ronan sat down on the step of the closed hamburger shack.

Deacon snorted. “Why? Did you find a hug to keep you occupied?”

Ronan didn’t reply. Fleur wasn’t a hug. She was something special.

“You did, didn’t you? Just like you to make the best out of a shit assignment.”

“She isn’t a hug, D. She’s legit.”

“Say what now?” Deacon no longer had laughter in his voice.

“Her name is Fleur, and she’s ... special.” Ronan looked up at the sound of Fleur’s laughter and tracked her and the other drivers as they walked down the street to the logistics center. “I think she’s the one.”

“How the fuck would you know that so quickly?” There was no attack in the question. He knew his brother, and Deacon really wanted to know how he’d made that call in such a short amount of time.

“Remember when Dad told us about how he met Mom? That connection he tried to describe? Well, that shit is real, and it’s almost a physical thing. The first time I kissed her it was like something just clicked. Chemistry, personality, looks, she’s it for me.”

“Does she feel the same way?”

“Yeah, think so.” He cleared his throat. “I’m going to find her a job with Guardian back in Colorado.”

The silence on the other end of the line was expected. Deacon was the more cautious of the two of them. He thought everything through before he spoke. “Are you leaving the field?”

“Thinking about it,” Ronan admitted. “We need to talk about that, though. I have no idea where they’d want me to work. Domestic Operations is busy, but my heart is with the teams. Can both of us work in the same section?”

“Don’t see why not. The girls do. Besides, there are other portions of the overseas division. Some we don’t talk about.”

Ah, the assassin’s arm. But that was Uncle Joseph’s baby, and Ronan didn’t see Joseph retiring. He’d be at the helm until he was a hundred and fifty years old and still be able to beat the hell out of anyone. “Yeah, that’s true, but that comes with a different set of issues.”

“Uncle Joseph,” Deacon deadpanned.

“Right.” Ronan laughed. “The business is big enough for us and all the cousins to move up eventually. I mean, we’re international with thousands of employees, I’m sure I’ll find a fit. Look at the Kings, except for Jasmine, they’ve all come into the organization and work essential positions. Jason is CEO, Jacob runs the teams, Joseph has black ops, Jared and Jade are domestic operations, and we’re expanding.” The Kings were a life force of Guardian, and hopefully, the family would continue to be a vital part of the organization's fabric.

“Absolute truth. The Kings and Dad built a damn good organization.” Deacon chuckled and then was quiet for a moment. “I’m happy for you, man.”

“Thank you.” That meant everything to him. He and his brother were tight, and even though they were half a world apart, they maintained that relationship and always would. “Oh, and those SMAWs came in handy. What made you add those to the equipment?”

“Dude, it was a gut feeling. I walked past that crate, and it just ... As I said, a gut feeling.”

“Well, it kept us from a sticky situation yesterday. I had more added to our resupply and a fifty cal. Wolf should be mounting it now to the frame we had Alpha put in one of the transport vehicles. We won’t lose any convoys. They have no idea what we have in store for them.”

“And the local government is okay with that?”

“It’s the fucking wild west out here, Deacon. Nothing but local militia, and they work for whoever pays the most. Militant factions are the ones hitting the convoys. Human trafficking is a way to make money, and the host nation looks the other way. It’s much more convoluted than that, lots of tentacles and bad players, but I can’t get into it on the phone.”

“Need help?”

“No, but you know I’ll always say yes to you and Cobra team showing up. The problem is you’re halfway around the world.”

“That’s just a matter of an airplane ride or two. I’ll call Uncle Jacob and set it up.”

“Then I’ll see you in a day or two.” Ronan smiled so hard his face hurt. “It’s been too damn long.”

“It has. Keep your ass alive until I get there to save it.”

“Fuck you, asshole. Come over to visit if you must, but I don’t need saving.”

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“Panther team always needs saving. I mean, you’re named after a fucking cat.”

“Which means we have nine lives, and your team is named after a fucking snake.”

“The king of snakes,” Deacon reminded him.

“Right. The king of snakes. That is terrifying.” Ronan talked shit with his brother. It was so damn good to be able to do it.

“Scarier than a little pussy.”

“And now, we should say goodbye.” Ronan laughed.

“We should. I’ll see you soon. Whatever it takes.”

“As long as it takes.” Ronan ended the call and headed toward the logistics building. Damn, life was pretty fucking good. He had a woman who rocked his world, a family that was the absolute best, and his brother flying in. Who the fuck cared about the militant factions?

CHAPTER 17

Fleur’s hands gripped the wheel of the deuce and a half. The massive vehicle had power steering, thank goodness. She stayed on Ronan’s ass, just as he’d told her. Six new trucks and the truck they’d transported the drivers in were nose to tail, with Ronan in a Jeep in the front and Wolf in a new Jeep in the rear. Thankfully, there was air conditioning, so the trucks’ dust didn’t fill the cabs and choke the drivers.

To say she was nervous was an understatement, especially when they drove around the vehicles that had been destroyed by the rockets Ronan had fired yesterday.

Fleur glanced at the burned-out, twisted metal as she drove. Was that only yesterday? Ronan and his team hadn't been in the camp long, but he was under her skin in ways she couldn't understand, and she really didn't care to understand. Last night with him was a dream in so many ways. The sex was spectacular and beyond anything she'd experienced before. Sure, she'd had relationships, but never had a man made her feel so beautiful or wanted ... almost essential. That wasn't the right word, but trying to put words to the sensation of knowing for a moment that if you weren't with him at that moment, neither of you would have reached the heights you reached ... Last night was a pivotal experience. She had no lingering doubts about going back to the States. She'd done everything she could do here, and the last months had been harsh and gut-wrenching with the loss of the convoys, people, and friends. The year before that was beyond frustrating. Trying to stop the inevitable, the shuttering of a camp that was desperately needed had exhausted her mentally. Fighting people who couldn't or wouldn't help and getting shut down in every way had led her to the desperate ploy of using the tunnels. Thank God Shelly had called her on it and Ronan was making strides in getting the convoys back on the road. Yes, she'd happily go back to the States, and if Ronan offered a job again, she'd thank him for the open door and then work to prove herself to the people who would give her the opportunity.

When they crested the rise to the camp, Fleur flexed first her right hand and then her left. She'd been holding the wheel so tight that her hands ached. Scared. You bet your ass she'd been scared, but she and the other drivers had trusted Ronan and Wolf to protect them on the route, and they had.

Staff came out to greet them as the vehicles drove into camp. Ronan had told her not to park near the tents but to bring her truck to his camp. She followed him and parked it behind their tent, as requested. This truck held Guardian equipment and supplies,

while the other six trucks were full of camp supplies.

Fleur grabbed the insulated bag Ronan had found her, which held the hamburger and fries for Shelly. Ronan walked back to her and leaned down for a quick kiss. “We made it,” she said with a smile after he leaned back.

“Did you have any doubts?” he asked.

“Doubts, no. But no one wants to be shot at, and I’m really glad they didn’t try today.”

“We were ready for them if they did. I’ve got to help unload this.” He nodded to her truck. “And then set up our tent.”

She smiled. “I like that. Our tent.”

“So do I. Take Shelly the salmonella you bought her.”

Fleur laughed. “I will. See you later?”

“That’s a promise.” He swatted her on the ass as he walked by, and she spun around.

“You did not just do that.”

Ronan spun and walked backward. “What?” He held up his hands. “No witnesses, just saying.”

She lifted a finger and pointed at him. “That’s a hard no.”

Ronan smiled. “Noted for future reference.”

She shook her head and headed into the camp. Miller stopped her. “You didn’t have any problems?”

“Not coming back. We were attacked yesterday, but Ronan and Wolf used some rockets to fight them off.”

Miller’s eyes rounded. “Rockets? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Fleur shook her head. “No. It was intense. We wouldn't have stood a chance if they hadn’t been with us.”

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“Jesus,” Miller said and rubbed his face. “What’s in the truck?” He nodded toward Guardian’s camp.

“Tents and stuff.” She assumed it was more of the same: ammo and probably rockets, too. “They brought some big ones and a couple of personal-sized ones—one for me and one for Shelly. There are a couple more for those who’ve given up their tents, too.” She snapped her fingers as she smiled at Miller and said, “And more candy.”

The man blinked and then shook his head. “Rockets and tents.”

“I know, right? Who would’ve believed we’d get to this point. I have to get this to Shelly.” She lifted the small bag. “I’ll be back.”

“Yeah, okay.” Miller crossed his arms and looked at the Guardian camp. “Fucking rockets.”

Fleur glanced at the man and then where Ronan and Wolf were working. Yeah, she was surprised by the rockets, too. That was hard to wrap your head around, especially working at an IDP camp. She shrugged and headed to the hospital tent. She waited until Shelly was free before pulling the bag out of the insulated tote. The gold arches were enough to make Shelly shout, “No way!”

Fleur nodded her head. “Ronan got an insulated bag from somewhere. It was in the fridge all night and here today, so I think it’s still good.”

“I’d eat it if it were seven days old and growing mold.” Shelly grabbed the bag from her and unwrapped the burger. Taking a huge bite out of it, she moaned. “Even cold,

it's fantastic." Or at least that was what Fleur thought she said. The amount of meat and bread in the woman's mouth muffled her words. Shelly dipped into the bag and pulled out some sad-looking fries. She shoved them in her mouth, too. "I love you." She closed her eyes. "Thank you."

"Hey, a pinky promise is a pinky promise. Ronan bought four of everything on the menu for all the drivers. I saved that for you. It was touch and go for a while. A real feeding frenzy."

"I can imagine." Shelly swallowed hard. "How was the trip?"

"The way back was good. We were attacked on the way there. Ronan and Wolf used rockets to get rid of them. We drove past the wrecked vehicles today on the way back."

"Wait, go back. Rockets? Like real rockets?"

Fleur blinked. "Is there a fake rocket?"

"Smartass." Shelly rolled her eyes. "That had to have been scary."

"It was, but if I ever doubted Guardian could protect the convoys, I don't now. You know how the convoys get stretched out when we drive?"

"Yeah," Shelly said before taking another bite of the burger.

"Ronan made us drive nose to tail. I mean, there was less than ten feet between each vehicle. That was nerve-racking, and so was waiting for someone to drive at us with guns blazing. But as I said, it didn't happen."

Shelly swallowed what was in her mouth. "Pass my water, would you?" Fleur went to

the small fridge, which held Shelly's reusable water bottle and all the medicines that needed refrigeration. She pulled the bottle out and gave it to her friend. Shelly thanked her and asked, "How did you and Ronan get on?"

Fleur smiled and lifted her eyebrows. "Very well, thank you. Exceptionally, actually. What about you and Jug?"

Shelly cocked her head. "Did you know Jug is short for Juggernaut? But his real name is Colt."

"I didn't know that, and stop avoiding my question." Fleur hopped up on the exam table and dangled her feet while waiting for Shelly, who was drinking water. Finally, the woman finished and capped the bottle. She sighed and shook her head. "Either he doesn't like me, or he's gay."

Fleur's surprised laugh wasn't intended to embarrass Shelly, but the woman groaned. "Yeah, thanks, that's what I get for telling you the truth."

Fleur jumped off the table and went over to her. "No, no, I'm sorry. I just wasn't expecting that answer. Why do you say that?"

Shelly groaned. "Fleur, I've been an outright hussy. I've done everything except come out here in the middle of the night and attack him—nothing I've done works. I mean absolutely nothing. So, if he isn't gay, he isn't interested in me." She carefully wrapped the remainder of her burger with the paper and put it back in the bag. "I'll finish the rest for dinner."

"Do you want me to ask Ronan if Jug is gay?" Fleur assumed Ronan would tell her the truth.

Shelly shook her head. "No, I'm just going to drop it and be frustrated. It's gotten to

the point that I'm embarrassing myself now. Such a shame, too. He's everything I ever wanted and didn't know I wanted. Shit, that didn't make sense."

"No, it did. Believe me, it did. Anyway, we have our tents now, so you can move your stuff tonight and not worry about him being three feet from you." She pointed to Jug's cot that was just on the other side of the canvas wall from hers.

"Yeah, that's good." Shelly nodded. "So, tell me about you and Ronan."

Fleur winced. "It's perfect and so damn good, and I feel bad telling you that now."

Shelly rolled her eyes. "Why? That's fabulous news. I'm so happy for you. At least one of us is getting some loving."

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Fleur closed her eyes and sighed. “God, yes.”

“Wait, wait,” Shelly said and scooted closer to her. “Maybe if I get closer to you, I can get a contact orgasm, you know, like a contact high?”

Fleur laughed so hard she held her stomach. “Aren’t ... you ... a ... doctor?” She had to force the words out between her laughs. Shelly’s giggles didn’t help. Tears fell from her eyes, and she wiped at them, laughing so hard her body ached. “Contact ... orgasm.”

“Well, that’s how you get them, right? Contact? I can’t get that!” Shelly held her stomach and laughed just as hard as Fleur.

“What’s so funny?” Miller asked as he came into the tent. Fleur looked at Shelly, and they laughed even harder. The man looked at them and shook his head. He tried a couple of times to ask Shelly something but gave up and walked out. Fleur pointed to the empty doorway, and Shelly shrieked with laughter. Laughing, Fleur dropped to the ground because she couldn’t stand up any longer. God, it was great to have friends who got you.

CHAPTER 18

“Is it cabled down?” Ronan asked Wraith, who was helping Wolf secure the canvas to the deuce and a half.

“Yep. They’ll have to slice through the canvas if they want to see what’s in it,” Wolf said.

“Next to our tent,” Wraith added, which was the ultimate detractor in Ronan’s opinion. He and Jug had set up the women’s tents. Shelly’s was on the right of the men’s tents, Fleur’s on the left. Both were an acceptable distance away for privacy.

“The big tents are going up.” Wolf nodded toward the main camp. The structures team didn’t waste any time. The excitement of the convoy's supplies was contagious.

“They didn’t waste any time,” Jug said. “I’m officially on the clock. I’ll go make the rounds of the militia posts.”

“Good idea. Wolf, rack out. You have a mid to turn with Stryker.”

“Sounds good.” Wolf picked up his uniform shirt and weapon, which was within easy reach. “Night.”

Ronan nodded in acknowledgment as he stared at Jug. “What the hell is going on with him?”

“Love,” Wraith said as he moved to stand next to Ronan.

Ronan slowly turned to look at Wraith. “If love makes him a grumpy motherfucker, we need to break up that romance.”

Wraith shook his head. “He hasn’t made a move.”

Ronan did a double-take at his second in command. “How the hell do you know?”

Wraith lifted an eyebrow. “Frustration on both ends.”

“Oh.” Well, that would lead him to believe Wraith’s assumption. “Fuck, what’s he waiting for?”

Wraith shrugged. “Not my place.”

“If it affects us working with him, it is our place.” Ronan sighed. “Cobra team is on its way.”

A huge smile spread across Wraith’s face. “Yeah?”

Ronan laughed. “Yeah. It will be good to see them again.”

“Damn straight.” Wraith slapped him on the back. “Best news ever.”

“Thought you’d think so,” Ronan said to the man’s back. Wraith had a handful of friends, and his best friend from his childhood was assigned to Cobra team. When he was with Ranger, Wraith was a different person. He talked and laughed without being guarded. The transformation was remarkable. But Ronan got it. Deacon was his best friend, and relationships grounded in a lifetime of experiences were easy to slip back into.

Ronan glanced after Jug, who was at the first checkpoint. He grabbed his uniform shirt and put it on before grabbing his M-4 and tracking after Jug. He caught up with him at the second checkpoint. Jug’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t say a word until they were done talking to the militia and heading to the next post.

Jug grunted, “I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem like it. Talk to me.”

“Nope. Thanks.” Jug declined his invitation.

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Ronan sighed. “Look, I don’t want to push my advice on you.”

“Good! Hey, see, we’re on the same page.”

Ronan snorted, “Your sarcasm is not lost on me.”

“Damn, that’s too bad.” Jug laughed, but it was bitter and forced.

Ronan stopped and put a hand on Jug’s arm. He would try one more time. “What’s going on, man? You know you can talk to me.”

Jug stopped and crossed his arms over his chest. “She deserves better.”

“Excuse me? Didn’t we have this conversation? She isn’t settling, asshole. You’re an elite warfighter with exceptional skills. You make more money than most people I know. True, you have your faults. I mean, you can’t run worth a shit.” Jug busted out a laugh, and they started walking again. “You need to stop tearing yourself down, Colt. You aren’t what they said you were. I wouldn’t have you on my team if you were.” Colt’s life growing up had been one tragedy after another. He joined the Marines to escape and then joined Guardian to have a better career, and he was exceptional. The bastards who’d torn him down had done a fucking job on his self-esteem, though. Most of the time, it wasn’t an issue, but when it came to relationships, the man’s self-esteem was in a deep pit.

“Wraith said that, too.”

Ronan elbowed him. “What? That you can’t run?”

Jug laughed. “It’s just hard to believe.”

“Have I ever led you down the wrong path?”

Jug shook his head. “No, Skipper, you haven’t.”

“And I never will. Shelly’s special. Don’t let this slip past you, my man. You might not have another chance at the real thing.”

“Are you taking that step with Fleur?” Jug asked.

“I am. I haven’t told anyone else yet, but I’m considering taking a desk at headquarters.”

Jug stopped. “What?”

“It was supposed to happen soon anyway, but to be with her, I think I could do it.”

“Wraith would take us on, right?”

“Hell, yeah. He’s ready.” They started walking again.

“He gets me.” Jug nodded. “I don’t want to see you go, Skipper, but I get it.”

“And let me tell you this: when you, Wraith, Stryker, and Wolf are ready to quit the field, I’ll have a place for each of you. Guardian will always be your home.”

Jug nodded. “That helps. I’ll admit, I worry about what will happen when I can’t do this anymore.”

“You’ll work for me. End of statement. Period. And that’s because you’re too fucking

valuable to this organization to lose.”

“Thanks, Skipper.”

“For what? Telling the truth?” He nodded to the camp entrance. “I’ll finish the round. Go find that woman and let her know you’re all in.”

Jug looked at the gate and then back at him. “Probably should.”

“Ya think?” Ronan shook his head when Jug didn’t move. “Do you need my size twelve up your ass?”

“I’m going, I’m going. Fucking bossy.”

“That’s because I am your boss!” Ronan lifted his hands in the air.

“Oh, right.” Jug laughed and started to run toward the gate. Holy hell, the man could run. He’d have to remember to tell Wraith that.

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It took him about two hours to complete the walk around. He visited with the posted militia, and the fact that he spoke their language fluently was helpful. He heard stories of how each man had ended up working with the militia. For most, it was the only thing they could do to make money. Survival made a man do things he normally wouldn't. It was almost dark when he made it back to the camp, and he saw a lantern on in Fleur's tent. Going to the flap, he called her name, and she pushed the flap back and smiled in greeting. "Come in! I love the space!"

He slipped through the canvas. "I took a chance that maybe the cot wasn't the most comfortable for both of us." She rolled her bottom lip with her teeth and stepped out of his way. She'd made a bed on the ground. There was a tarp on the bottom, and on top were two sleeping bags zipped together. Her small suitcase was on the cot she'd brought from her small tent, and the lamp sat on a box she'd turned over near the bed she'd made. "It's not much."

He pulled her close with one arm and kissed her upturned lips. "This is perfect. Have you eaten?"

She smiled and pointed at a box in the other corner of the tent. "Wraith gave me a case of MREs. We can eat here."

"Then that's what we'll do. I need to check in and make sure everything is handled. I'll be right back." He kissed her again, this time a bit deeper. Damn, what this woman did to him should be illegal. He pulled himself away from her finally and headed to his tent. Wraith was out front at a fire pit the men had dug while he was gone. "Status?" Ronan said as he sat down beside him.

“Stryker and Wolf are sleeping. I’ll wake them when I hit the hay. Jug’s in the camp.” Wraith glanced at him. “What you said to him worked.”

“Thank God,” Ronan said, and they both laughed.

“Jug said you’re thinking about a desk.”

Well, that news traveled fast. He nodded. “I am. No decisions yet. A lot has to be settled. You’re ready to lead this team.”

Wraith was quiet for a long time before nodding. “I am. Don’t mean I’m happy about you leaving.”

“Don’t push me out the fucking door, man. I’m not leaving yet.” Ronan chuckled. “Just thinking about it. Thinking about the future.”

Wraith nodded toward Fleur’s tent. “The future is over there. Not here.”

Ronan gazed at the fire. Something he wouldn’t do if he weren’t shutting down for the night. “Somehow, I can’t help but think my future is tethered to both places. We both know what’s expected.”

Wraith nodded. “But we make our way forward.”

Ronan glanced at Wraith. “Damn straight. The footsteps that built Guardian don’t fit me, and I can’t walk in anyone else’s shoes. Know what I mean?”

“You know I do.” Wraith stood up and slung his M4 over his shoulder. “Do whatever it takes, Skipper. This life is all we have.”

“For as long as it takes.” He watched Wraith walk into the camp. Wraith was a couple

of years younger than his other men, but he had a soul that was fucking ancient.

Ronan stood and slung his weapon then walked over to Shelly's tent and called her name. She popped out of the tent with a huge smile on her face. "Thank you so much for the tent. Fleur said you were behind bringing more in."

"You're welcome. Do you have everything you need?"

"I do, thank you. Jug is going to stop by after he finishes his shift, and we'll have a late dinner. Wraith brought me an entire case of MREs. I'm being spoiled."

Ronan laughed. "Spoiled by MREs? That is a low standard."

She made a face. "Right? Oh, well, I am what I am."

"And that is enough. Enjoy your tent and evening."

"Thank you. I know you'll enjoy yours." She slipped back into her tent before Ronan could even laugh. Yeah, he would enjoy his evening and hopefully every evening for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 19

Ronan woke, opening his eyes, immediately aware of Fleur's body beside him. The intimacy of them naked inside the doubled sleeping bag was a luxury he couldn't afford himself again. Wraith would have his back tonight, and he was allowing his focus to waiver just this once. He let his hands slide over her soft skin, and when she murmured something and pressed back against him, he smiled at the reaction. Her response to his touch was amazing to watch. The dream of any man was to be able to drive his woman insane with his touch, and he knew he could send Fleur over the edge or hold her there until she shattered in his arms.

He kissed her neck, moving her long, thick braids as she sighed and smiled. He continued his slow exploration of her body. Her nipples tightened as his fingers lightly traveled over them. There was no hurry, no rush in his touches. He had this time and was making sure he knew her body by mapping every nuance of her in his mind. He didn't know what the future held. He hoped it held them as a couple, but he wasn't a fool. They would have to work to have a relationship. He wanted a life-long commitment. He wasn't interested in just the now or perhaps a month or two.

He moved his kisses to her ear, and she shivered and then moaned softly. Fuck, the smallest things this woman did made him as hard as a diamond. He slowly moved his kisses to her shoulder so he could watch her better. When his fingers found her sex, she inhaled quickly and opened her legs for him. Fuck, she was hot and so ready for him. He shifted and moved over her. Her arms draped around his neck, and she sighed sweetly.

He dropped for a kiss as he entered her. Her tight heat was heaven around his cock. She wrapped her legs around him, and he slid deep inside her. Fuck, she had no idea how perfect she was. As he moved his hips, she arched, meeting his thrusts. He kept the movements slow, the build like a slow flow of lava. The heat of their union moved them both closer to that fucking mind-blowing ledge, but the swell flowed and moved them without urgency. They shared breaths, kissed without end, and reached a quiet climax that swept them over the crest.

He held her as they came down from the high before he said, "I'm not letting you get away from me."

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She chuckled. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“No, I mean?—”

She rolled over and put her finger on his lips. “I know what you mean. I thought about it while driving back here yesterday. Hours and hours of nothing else to do except a solid self-examination. If you still open that job door for me, I’ll walk through it. I know there are no promises, and what’s between us is young, but I agree with you. I’m not going to let you get away from me either.”

“Damn, you’re fucking perfect.” He leaned in and kissed her soft lips. “Fucking perfect.”

“Ah, Skipper?”

Fleur squeaked and dove under the sleeping bag. Ronan laughed at her. “Yeah?”

“We had another breach. Wraith said to come get you.”

He was laughing almost too hard to hear Wolf’s response, but those words put shit into perspective again, and he shut that shit down, immediately all business. “I’ll be right there.”

He was up and out of the sleeping bag in an instant. “Over there. Wipes.” Fleur pointed to a small plastic box. Ronan used a couple quickly and was dressed in under three minutes.

He bent down and kissed her quickly. “Be safe.”

“I will.” She nodded, holding the sleeping bag over her breasts; he grabbed his weapon and M-4 and hustled out.

“Where?”

“Behind the structures tent. It wasn’t there when I initially walked around the perimeter. When I circled this time, there it was.”

“From inside or outside?”

“Inside, and there’s a fuckton of tracks,” Wolf swore bitterly. “Small tracks, Skipper. Stryker is trying to follow them. I swear if I catch the bastard responsible for doing this, I’ll kill them myself.”

“Let’s put a hold on murder until we know all the facts.” Ronan agreed with his man, though.

“Fine, but killing is still on the table, right?”

“For damn sure,” Ronan said as they walked. Before he got to the hole in the fence line, he popped into the structure’s tent. All the tools were missing from the shelves. He walked over to a large metal bin. There was a lock on it, and it was secure. Ronan exited the tent a second later and reached the entry point for the breach. Sure as shit, the wires were bent back toward the outside. But this one was different. The person inside would have had to go through the hole and make another one on the other side of the fence that held the tractor and attachments they used to dig and fill holes.

Ronan ducked through the hole and made his way over to where Wraith was squatting down. Wraith held up a hand, and Ronan stopped. In Arabic, Wraith said.

“It’s okay. He’s not going to hurt you, and neither am I.”

Ronan dropped down to see who Wraith was talking to. A little girl was tucked underneath the tractor, obviously terrified. He stood again. “I’ll get Fleur.”

“Yeah, that would be good,” Wraith said in a soft, calm voice. “I’m just going sit here and talk to her.”

Ronan went back through the hole in the fence. “Dude, wake Jug up and have him bring Fleur to the structures tent ASAP.”

“Copy.” Dude’s reply was immediate.

Ronan turned as his name was called, “Good morning. I wanted to thank you again for the tents. We were able to move in the majority of the IDPs that didn’t have shelter. We’ll be in fine shape once we get the convoys going.” Miller smiled at him and then saw Wolf. His brow creased. “What’s going on?”

“A breach in the fence,” Ronan said. “We have a small girl hiding under the tractor. We’ve sent for Fleur. She’s terrified.”

“Son of a bitch.” Miller scrubbed his face.

Ronan didn’t say a word. There wasn’t anything to say. The camp, with fences meant to keep the occupants safe ... didn’t. And the person he believed to be helping from the inside could be innocent. That was hard to remember; he had a fine line to balance this walk on. As soon as Dude and Tink gathered enough information, he’d be able to act, but at this point, he couldn’t.

Fleur jogged down the pathway. Her combat boots were unlaced and flopping as she ran. “What do you need?”

After Ronan explained the situation, Fleur crawled through the hole in the fence and went over to where Wraith was still talking quietly to the girl. Wraith stood up and left, and Fleur smiled at the little one. It took about two minutes for the girl to be coaxed out from under the tractor. During that time, Jug and Shelly arrived.

“Where is she?” Shelly asked.

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“There.” Ronan nodded in Fleur’s direction.

“I’ll go with you,” Miller said.

Shelly shook her head. “No offense, but I doubt she wants to see a man right now, Miller. You can stop by the medical tent in a little bit.” Shelly waited for the girl and Fleur to come.

Mathias walked up to the tent. “Is this a line for coffee?” The man laughed at his own joke.

Miller shook his head. “No.”

Mathias’ smile dropped as he looked at Ronan. “What’s up?”

“Another poaching incident,” Ronan said. “Can you get your guys on that for us?” He pointed to the hole in the fence.

“No,” Mathias swore bitterly. “I’ll do it myself. How in the hell are they cutting the fence? I’ve locked up every tool that could do it.”

“What?” Miller asked. “Why are you locking up tools?”

“Because some bastard is cutting holes in the fence, and I don’t want to be a part of it even in the slightest. All our cutting tools are secured from the time I leave to the time I get back.” Mathias stormed into the tent, still cussing.

Jug looked over at him. “Skipper, all we have todo is toss the tents. We find the cutting tool, and we’ll find who is doing this, right?”

“You can’t do that.” Miller sighed. “These people have been searched, and anything dangerous is locked up. We return it to them when they’re on the convoy trucks after processing.”

“Well, someone has cutters, and they weren’t taken away.” Jug shook his head. “I’m going to see if Shelly or Fleur need help.”

“I’ll go with you,” Miller said. “Maybe the girl saw something. That will help us.”

Ronan closed his eyes and took a deep breath before tapping his ear. “Dude, please tell me you have something.”

“I’m working it, Skipper. We’re concentrating on the one you mentioned, but right now, there’s nothing. I’m not giving up, though. I know a few tricks. It’s just going to take time. People are getting better and better at covering their digital tracks. If what I know fails to produce any actionable evidence, I’ll call in a favor from Jewell or Con. If they can’t find anything, it isn’t there. I promise we’re working it.”

“I have faith in you, Dude. Keep me up to date.”

“Oh, I will, and the background on Fleur is pristine. Figured you’d want that question taken care of first.”

He smiled. “I knew it would be, but thanks for expediting that issue.”

“No worries, and one last thing, Cobra team will be wheels down in country in eighteen hours.”

“Roger. Copy.” Ronan glanced at his watch. It was a quarter after five. That meant Deacon and his team would land at eleven fifteen. Give them rack time, and they’d be pulling into camp by early afternoon tomorrow. Thank God. Now, all he needed was proof or exclusion of the person Al suspected. Then, he needed to get the convoys up and running.

He had plenty of shit to look after until that point. The first was finding out what Habib knew. Jug could handle anything that came up with the women, and Wolf wouldn’t hang it up until Stryker came back inside the camp. Speaking of which, Ronan tapped his ear. “Stryker?”

“Yo,” the man responded immediately.

“Anything?”

“Followed the tracks to the rocky area north of camp. I followed a hunch and headed to that road we came in on. I found a shoe and a scarf beside the road by the rocks they’d have to go through. I think they hustled them out to the road and loaded them up. They could be out of the country by now.”

“Copy. Are you heading back now?”

“Yeah.”

“Skipper, I can go get him in the Jeep.” Wolf entered the conversation.

“Do it. Wraith, we’ll see if Habib can be enticed to give us any information.”

“Copy,” Wraith acknowledged, and Ronan cast another glance at the hole in the fence. Wolf was right. Murder was on the table. If he could prove the fucker was aiding these sick motherfuckers, he’d be tempted, sorely tempted.

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He jumped into the passenger seat of the Jeep Wraith was driving. He was in a fucking horrid mood for having such a fucking good night. He exited the Jeep and walked into Habib's hut without knocking.

Habib cocked his head and nodded to a space at the table with him. "Coffee?"

Ronan wasn't there for pleasantries. "Who the fuck is inside?"

"I honestly do not know."

Ronan reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He pulled out a stack of American bills. "Who is it?"

Habib stared at the money and licked his lips. "If I knew, I would tell you."

Ronan snarled, shoved the money in his pocket, and turned to leave.

"I can tell you how they know when and where to cut the holes."

Ronan turned to look at him. "Talk."

"The ISIL leave a message under the ruined capstone rocks by the gates. The message is retrieved, and communication is complete."

Ronan pulled out the notes and dropped them on the table. "If you can find out who is inside the camp, that will triple." He strode out of the hut and got into the Jeep. "Let's go." They drove toward the camp. "You heard?"

“Everything,” Wraith said. “Time to set up your new toy.”

“Damn straight.” Ronan wanted that fucker in the worst way.

CHAPTER 20

Fleur came out of the medical tent when Jug and Miller walked up. Miller demanded, “Is she talking?”

“About what?” Fleur asked.

“About who took her,” Miller said.

She shook her head. “She was playing in the lot with other kids and got tired. She fell asleep under the truck, and when she woke up, she was locked in the fence. She saw the others being taken. One woman fell, saw her, and motioned for her to stay hidden. She did until Wraith found her.”

“Well, that’s no help,” Miller said and turned on his heel.

She blinked and looked up at Jug. “Sorry?”

Jug shrugged. “He’s a self-important dick.”

Fleur couldn’t help the laughter that his comment caused. “He isn’t, really. I’ve worked with him for years. He can be direct, but he’s a hard worker like all of us.”

Jug rolled his eyes. “My gut says he’s a dick. I’ll stick with that.”

“Shelly is almost done. I’m going to get Tammara so she can talk with the girl.”

“I can do that.” Jug motioned to her boots. “You might want to tie them.”

She glanced down. Her boots were untied. “Oh, thanks.” She dropped down and tied her boots. When she was finished, Jug was gone, and she was alone. “I swear, they all walk as quietly as ghosts in a graveyard.” She went to the admin tent and talked with Rana before returning to her anti-trafficking tent. Rana would work to try to figure out who was missing, and she’d help her after she completed a few tasks for Ronan. She opened the flap, went inside, and was surprised to see Miller. “Hey, what are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you. I wanted to apologize. Things are getting to me.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I see you and the Guardian are getting close. Kind of fast, wasn’t it?”

Fleur jerked like she’d been struck. What in thehell? Did he actually think he had the right to talk to her like that? “Excuse me? Are you my father?”

Miller frowned. “No, but I’m your friend. You realize guys like that are only after one thing. They’ll leave you as soon as another assignment comes along.”

“Miller, I appreciate the concern, but believe me, I am old enough to make my own decisions and live with them.” She sat down and crossed her legs.

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Miller sat down in a chair across from her. “Okay, I get it. I’ll back off, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He leaned forward. “On a different topic, with all the transport vehicles here now, we’re going to schedule a convoy, right?”

“I’m working that issue and making calls today to see where we can take the IDPs and how many they can take. Ronan hasn’t said when, but he’s moving steadily toward the convoys. I want to be ready when he is.”

“Smart. We’ll need to make notifications if we start. Management will want to know.”

Fleur shook her head. “I’m not making any notifications until I’m told to. Right now, I’m running everything through Ronan. He controls security, so leaking anything about movements won’t come from me.”

Miller cocked his head. “You say that like it would come from me.”

Fleur looked heavenward. “No, I didn’t. We’ve worked together forever, Miller. I would never say that.”

Miller smiled a little and shrugged. “That’s why I thought I would try the father’s speech earlier.”

Fleur snorted, “You don’t have any kids, Miller. Maybe you should practice that dad bit before you try again.”

He chuckled. “Maybe. I’m going to head to the admin tent and help figure out how

many were taken last night.” He walked toward the entrance of her tent.

Fleur thought of something and stopped him. “Hey, Miller?”

“Yeah?”

“How do you think they kept the women quiet?”

He frowned, “What?”

“If I were being taken captive, I’d freak out. There was no screaming or crying. How do you think they kept them quiet?” Fleur frowned. “What would make them go willingly?”

Miller stared at her for a long moment. “That’s something to think about, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “It’s so strange.”

“Do what you need to do. I’ll go help figure out who we lost.” Miller let the flap shut behind him.

Fleur went to the file cabinet and pulled out her contact notebook. The clank of metal against metal stopped her from pushing the drawer in again. She pulled the drawer back out and moved a folder. Beneath it was a pair of wire cutters. She stared at the cutters and then at the opening of the tent. What the fuck? Had Miller put the cutters there? Had someone else? And a bigger question: Why would someone put a pair of wire cutters in her file cabinet? She knew they weren’t there two days ago, but the tent had been unoccupied and unsupervised when she went to Al-Tanf with Ronan. She grabbed the cutters and put them inside her contact notebook. This was something she needed Ronan to know about.

Trying to look as nonchalant as possible, she returned to the Guardian tent as Wolf and Stryker pulled up. “Have you seen Ronan?”

“Not since we left the camp about ten minutes ago. But I do know he’s talking to the militia,” Wolf said, then stopped. “What’s wrong?”

She looked around and then opened the top of her notebook. “I found this in my filing cabinet just now.”

Wolf gently pushed the cover closed. He tapped his ear. “Ronan. You need to come back to camp as soon as possible.”

He nodded. “They’ve left the militia’s camp. They should be here in a couple of minutes.”

“Good.” She nodded. “This wasn’t there two days ago.” She looked at Stryker. “Miller was in the tent when I got there, but the tent isn’t locked or guarded either. Anyone could have put it there, but why?”

“Oh, I’ve got a damn good reason why,” Wolf said. “Son of a bitch, I really hope what I think has happened hasn’t.”

“What do you think has happened?” Fleur frowned and turned around as the other Jeep pulled into the area. Ronan was out of the Jeep and heading their way before Wraith had turned off the vehicle.

“What’s up?” She opened the book, and he looked down. “Where did you get that?”

“In her filing cabinet. Ask who was in the tent when she went in there?” Wolf crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ll tell you, the man I’m going to kill.”

Fleur gasped and turned to Wolf. “What? You can’t do that! You don’t know if it was him!” She looked at Ronan. “Miller was in the tent, but I’ve worked with him forever. He would never do something like this.”

Ronan glanced around. “Everyone, settle down.” He tapped his ear. “Jug, come to the tent; time for a team meeting.”

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Ronan nodded and then looked at her. “He’s on his way. We need to talk.”

“What’s going on?” she asked as they walked toward the tent.

“I’ll explain when Jug gets here.” He put his hand on her back, and the warmth of his touch settled her nerves. They couldn’t think Miller was responsible for the fencing cuts. Well, obviously, Wolf did, but she’d make them see sense.

She sat down on Ronan’s cot and hugged her notebook until she realized she still had the cutters. She opened the book. “Can someone take these, please?”

Ronan did and examined the big plyer-looking tool.

“Well, at least we can eliminate you as a suspect. You have an alibi for last night,” Ronan said, winking at her. Her mouth dropped open, and she could feel her face flood with heat.

“Ronan!”

Stryker chuckled. “Ma’am, you’re part of the family now.”

She blinked at him and then laughed. “Some families have secrets.”

“Not this one,” Wolf said.

“Obviously.” She looked at Ronan.

He just gave her a cheeky smile. “At least you’re not worried about what the meeting is about now, are you?”

She blinked. “Ah, not in the slightest.”

Jug walked into the tent with Wraith. “All right, let’s get started. Fleur, none of this can be released to anyone, even Shelly. Are you good with that?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Ronan looked at Jug. “Are you?”

The man nodded. “Yes.”

“We have a person in camp who has worked for Guardian. This person is a trusted agent. They believe Miller is responsible for releasing the information on the convoys. It is believed that the first convoy was the convoy that was targeted. The staff member who was killed on that convoy was the target.”

“What? Why?” She couldn’t grasp why Miller would do that. “Surely, they have the wrong person.”

“Our person suggested the first staff member that was killed had figured out it was Miller aiding the ISIL.”

“Do you have any proof?” She twisted to look at all the men. “And why would he continue to have the convoys targeted?”

“Skipper, I may be wrong, but I’d guess it’s faster to attack the convoys than work the people out of the camp a handful at a time, and it’s more profitable,” Stryker said.

Ronan nodded. “Exactly.”

“But what evidence does this person have?” She wasn’t going to believe it. She couldn’t.

“Miller has Tuesdays off,” Ronan said.

Fleur frowned and shook her head. “So do other people, right? We looked at the rosters.”

“That’s true, which is why we haven’t acted differently toward him.” He pointed at Wolf. “Right?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Wolf crossed his arms. “Thank God he doesn’t interact with me. Might be a hard sell.”

Fleur shook her head. “I just can’t believe it’s Miller. That is just a huge stretch of the imagination. He’s been here the entire time I’ve been. He works so damn hard.”

“On a different topic, Fleur, do you know why this camp is closing?” Ronan asked.

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She sighed, “No, I don’t know. I’ve written letters and made calls, but nobody I’ve contacted can tell me why, especially when we need more camps, not fewer. I chased every possibility I could, but it was no good.”

Ronan nodded. “That was the sentiment of our people. People who work with the entities that man these camps.”

“Is that related to Miller or whoever’s targeting the population?”

“Unknown. We have operators looking into everything, but my people agree with you. It shouldn’t be shuttered unless there’s a need for the land it sits on.”

“A need?” Fleur frowned and shook her head, and then she remembered. “What ... Oh, wait, about a year and a half ago, there was a natural gas scare. Could that be ...”

“Natural gas or what’s under that.” He shrugged. “It could be. Right now, our people are tracking down everything, trying to find the reason this shit is going on. In the meantime, it’s our directive to get these people moved to a place they will be safe.”

“The convoys.” She nodded. “I was going to contact the other camps and see how many they can take. I have to go to the communication tent to do that. Do you want me to arrange supplies for the return trips, too?”

“Yes. My brother and his team will be heretomorrow afternoon. Set the first convoy up for Tuesday.”

“Tuesday? If you think the person responsible is off on Tuesday, they’ll inform on

you. You could be in danger. The staff driving could be in danger.” She shook her head. She wasn’t willing to lose anyone else, especially Ronan. “That’s setting us up for an attack, right?”

Ronan shook his head. “All staff will stay in camp. We’ll have two teams and do both—drive and guard the convoy. I’m not worried about an ISIL attack.”

“Okay, but how will you prove it’s Miller?”

“Our operators are working it, but since we suspect Miller, I’d like you to keep your eyes on him. Nothing obvious, just know where he’s at and what he’s doing.”

“I can do that, but what am I looking for?”

“Anything out of the normal for him. We also discovered that the person working with the ISIL has a drop-off point at the capstone ruins near the gate. We’re going to put out a camera and monitor the area.”

“I can watch him without making it look suspicious.” She nodded. “I’ll do it, but only to prove Miller isn’t involved.”

“I hope you’re right.” Ronan put his hands on her shoulders. “My gut tells me you aren’t.”

She shook her head. “No offense, but I hope your gut is wrong.” She couldn’t imagine Miller being responsible for trafficking people. For the murders ... “Why ... how ... we’ve spent the last four years caring for these people. What would be the reason he’d do something like that?”

“Money,” Wraith said.

She shook her head. “He has money. He told me he’s very comfortable.”

Ronan sighed. “We won’t know for sure until we have evidence.” He squeezed her shoulders. “And you have to promise me, all of us, that you won’t approach him or do anything that would put yourself in danger.”

She snorted. “Believe me, I’m not too stupid to live.”

Ronan’s hands froze. “What?”

“Oh, that’s a saying, you know, when the people in a really bad movie do something epically stupid so the bad guy can get to them. They’re too stupid to live.”

Wolf laughed. “I’m going to use that.”

“Same,” Wraith agreed.

Jug cleared his throat before saying, “Skipper, Shelly could help Fleur keep an eye on Miller.”

Ronan turned around. “I have no doubt she could, Jug, but I don’t want to put her in the middle of this. Fleur has been our point of contact all along. Miller knows it, which is dangerous enough if he is, in fact, guilty. Involving more people only puts more people at risk.”

She should thank Ronan for still maintaining hope that Miller was innocent, but the pain she felt just imagining her friend could be guilty hurt. “I have one question. I asked Miller this earlier. Why did the IDPs leave without making a fuss? If someone were trying to take me away from the camp, I’d scream bloody murder.”

Ronan glanced at her. “I’m assuming the person taking them had a weapon.”

Fleur considered it before nodding. “Yeah, that could be it.” But something told her it was something else. She would have to talk to the little girl under the truck again. Since she and her sister were scheduled to be on the truck tomorrow morning, it would be a good time to ask a few questions.

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“We all have work to do. Let’s get it. Stryker and Wolf, hit the sack.”

Putting his arm around Fleur, he walked with her outside the tent. “Miller was with us when Jug suggested tossing tents to find out who had a cutter this morning.”

She sighed and looked down at the hard-packed ground under her feet. “I just ...” There was a sense of desolation in the pit of her gut. “I’ll watch, and I’ll be careful.”

“That’s all I can ask.” He tipped her chin up. “We’ll know soon enough.”

“Yeah, Tuesday is the day after tomorrow.”

He nodded, and they stared out over the camp. She hoped she was right, but ...

CHAPTER 21

Ronan watched the two Jeeps come over the ridge into the valley where the IDP camp was. Deacon, Ranger, Ace, Bandit, and Rip were a hell of a team, and since they’d done more than their fair share of missions together, they were all damn good friends. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited for the Jeeps. As soon as Deacon saw him, a wide smile spread across both of their faces. Fuck, it had been almost eight months since he’d seen his brother in person.

As soon as the Jeep stopped, he grabbed his brother and pulled him in for a hug. “About time,” he said as they hugged.

“Damn straight,” Deacon agreed.

When they released, Deacon looked around. “So, this is home sweet home?”

“Not so sweet, but home base for now. Our tent has room for everyone’s gear until you get set up.”

“Perfect, we brought some noise makers and another fifty cal.” Deacon nodded toward the small trailer the second Jeep was pulling behind it.

“Another fifty is always welcome. How much do you know about what’s going on?”

“I had a long discussion with Gabby and Charley in the torture chamber they call a SCIF at Al-Tanf.”

“The broom closet?” Ronan laughed.

“Is that what it was? Holy hell, man, I’m not claustrophobic, but that booth tried to make me one.”

“I know. Unwedging my ass and falling out of that thing made me second-guess my physical fitness.”

“Right? Do we need to stop eating?”

“Either that or finish the fucking mission and never have to use the closet torture communication system again.”

“Exactly. You know Gabby and Charley were both put out about different things and chomping at the bit to find answers.”

Ronan narrowed his eyes. “Let me guess, Charley wants to find the bastard inside, and Gabby wants to know why the camp is closing.”

“You got it. Gabby’s working on it and calling in favors to get to the bottom of the closure. She seems to think it could fall under UN protection. Smoke has Charley busy, so she should stay out of your operator’s business. But you know her. She can’t drop something once she gets it in her brain.”

Ronan chuckled. “So, what you're saying is we could have another visitor?”

“Wouldn’t put it past her.” Deacon shrugged. “Smoke tries, but no one can control that woman.”

“Well, hopefully, we can figure it out before she commandeers an aircraft and jets her ass over here. Dude is working on the financials. He’s combed through all the staff and, as of now, hasn’t found anything. He contacted me about an hour ago. He wants to try one more thing in the morning, his time, and then he's hitting up Jewell if he doesn’t get anything.”

“If she can’t find it, no one can,” Deacon said, looking around. His men were unloading. “Where’re the guys?”

“Stryker and Wolf are sacked out in the tent. They’re pulling mids. Jug is on swings, and Wraith and I are days. Wraith and Jug are in the compoundor checking on the militia posts. Come with me over to the anti-trafficking tent. I’d like to introduce you to someone.”

Deacon nodded. “Ranger, two are sacked out. Keep it down around the tent.”

“Roger,” Ranger said and lifted a hand to Ronan, who returned the gesture.

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“Damn, is Ranger getting bigger?”

“Think so. He’s always pushing weights when we have them or doing bodyweight exercises. I’d call him hyper, but he’s so fucking chill, it would be a misnomer.”

“Wraith will be glad to see him. This way.” They moved away from the tents, and Ronan nodded to the tent next to the one Fleur occupied. “That tent belongs to the camp lead, Miller Dupre.”

Deacon nodded. “Noted.”

“And this one belongs to Fleur Buchanan.” He opened the flap, and Deacon went in ahead of him.

“Hey, you.” Fleur smiled up at Deacon and then noticed Ronan. Her eyes went wide. “Holy smokes. You guys are almost identical. You didn’t tell me he was your twin, did you?” She walked over to Ronan, and he dropped his arm over her shoulder.

“I can’t remember. Fleur, this is Deacon. Deacon, Fleur.”

She extended her hand, and Deacon took it. “A pleasure to meet you. He talks highly of you.”

Fleur blushed. “Yeah, well, I think he’s pretty awesome, too.” She smiled up at him, and then her face fell. “I’m glad you’re here. Camp Seven can take most of our IDPs. They’ve added four acres of tents.”

“When do they want us to bring them?”

“We can start tomorrow, but that isn’t what you wanted.” She glanced at Deacon.

“Does he know?”

“He does if you’re talking about the Tuesday connection,” Deacon answered for himself. “So, let’s go tomorrow. We can take one through without any concerns and ensure we have the route scouted.”

“I’d need to make notifications and, at a minimum, let my superiors know what’s going on.” Fleur rolled her bottom lip between her teeth.

He reached up and, using his thumb, pulled the lip out of her teeth’s clutches. “Stop worrying. The three of us will review the notification checklist, and we’ll identify the notifications we want you to make.”

Deacon nodded and pointed to Ronan and then himself. “And we’ll take the heat if someone gives you a rash of shit about being left out of the circle-jerk.”

Fleur blinked and then laughed. “He’s just like you.”

“Pretty much,” they both said at the same time.

Ronan pulled her notification notebook toward him. “Okay, so let’s cut the fat and all the bullshit out of this list.” He flipped it open and pointed to the first page.

Deacon flipped the page and then flipped another. “Well, this won’t work.”

“Right?” Ronan laughed. “I think I can remember five calls that need to be made. Six if you push it. She has four pages of bullshit. People wanting to be important if you ask me.”

“No doubt.” Deacon sat down. “Do you have a marker?”

“I do.” Fleur gave it to him. “It’s permanent.”

“Good,” both he and Ronan said at the same time. Deacon started to cross out the notifications that were complete bullshit. Ronan pointed to those that would endanger their route and the ones that made his eyes bleed from rolling so hard. By the time they finished, Fleur had four notifications to make.

“Okay, so I should make these ... when?” She looked at him, then at Deacon, and then back at him.

“After we roll out tomorrow morning,” Ronan said.

Deacon nodded. “Concur.”

“He’s going to have a small fit. He’s going to know as soon as we start loading.”

“Then we’ll tell him at that point.” Ronan shrugged. “He’s not going to stop us from going.”

Fleur leaned down, looked at the box, and drew a deep breath before letting it out. “I hope you’re wrong about Miller.”

“So do I,” Ronan said, but he was damn near certain he wasn’t. There was too much circumstantial evidence mounting against the man.

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Deacon stood up. “Let me check on my guys, and then I’d like you to take me on a tour of the camp.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll be there in a minute.” Ronan waited until his brother walked out of the tent before he went up to Fleur. “I need something.”

She frowned. “What?”

“This.” Sliding his arms around her, he lowered for a kiss. The hit of dopamine was instantaneous. Hell, maybe it was the oxytocin or serotonin. It didn’t matter what the shit was. The pleasure slammed into him immediately, intense as fuck, and he craved it with an intensity that knocked him on his ass. He lifted away slowly, watching as she opened her eyes. “Fuck, you’re irresistible.”

She smiled at him and licked her lips. “Right back at you.”

“We’ll get through this shuttering, and when we return to the States, you’ll come to Colorado with me.”

She cocked her head. “That didn’t sound like a question.”

“It wasn’t. There’s no question we need to explore this more. We’ve agreed on that already.”

She smiled at him. “We have.”

“Then there’s no argument. You come with me.”

“Only because I want to.” She lifted her eyebrows a couple of times.

“I’d never make you do anything you didn’t want.” He lowered for a slow, intense kiss. When he finished, she sighed and leaned against his chest. “I know, and that’s why I’ll come with you. But I already told you that.”

“I wanted it confirmed when we weren’t in the after-effects of mind-bending, reality-altering sex.”

She laughed and looked up at him. “It is confirmed. I’m in complete control of my faculties.”

“Good to know.” He kissed her forehead. “Promise me you won’t do anything to attract his attention.”

“Promise. He’ll be pissed he wasn’t notified sooner, so I don’t think he’ll be around much, but I can keep tabs on him.” She looked down at the thick notebook beside her notification checklist. “I need to let these people know they’ll be leaving tomorrow. Rana, Tammara, and I will do it. They have no reason to believe Miller doesn’t know, so they won’t talk to him about it.”

“I’ll brief him in the morning. That will keep you out of his target range.”

“I’m not afraid of him.”

He knew she wasn’t, but he wished she were. Caution always motivated him to be aware of his surroundings. “Just be cautious. Hoping things aren’t true is all right, trusting someone who’s been identified as suspicious isn’t the way to play this.”

“I promise. I’m suspicious of Miller. I won’t do anything stupid.”

He smiled at her. “You’ve never been stupid.” He kissed her one more time then let her get back to her work.

Deacon was walking toward him when he came out of the tent. “This way.” Ronan bypassed Miller’s tent and headed into the camp. Ronan explained the two instances of poaching that had happened since they’d been at the camp.

“How many did they get each time?” Deacon stopped short as a young boy ran out from between two huts and darted between another set. “A lot of kids here, isn’t there?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure the camp knows how many. It’s a best-guess type of situation. The camp isn’t a controlled entry or exit like the ones the local ISIL or their government runs. Here, people can come and go as they like, and with the drawdown, there are only a couple of people doing registration.”

Deacon looked around. “Sanitation is good.”

“Yeah, they have a well, which helps. The chow hall is over that way. Now that they have supplies, most people process through for one meal daily. At least that’s what Fleur tells me.” Ronan led him to an outside track around the tents. He lowered his voice as he continued to talk. “The local militia commander told us there was a drop area in the ruined capstone rock area at the main gate. Wraith and I set up a camera last night after most of the camp went to sleep.”

“A drop for what?” his brother asked as he took a piece of taffy from his pocket. Deacon offered one to him, and he took it.

“Instructions on when and where to cut the fence line.”

“And this has been going on the entire time?”

“Fleur said it has been, but when the new militia lead came in, it slowed.”

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“So, whoever was doing this could have been doing it all along, and they wouldn’t have known.”

“Pretty much.” Ronan nodded, popping the now unwrapped candy into his mouth. “Fleur doesn’t think it could be Miller.” He sighed.

“And you?”

“It makes me suspicious. When Jug suggested we toss all the tents to find the wire cutters, Miller was present. Then he’s in the anti-trafficking tent unattended, and Fleur finds cutters in her file cabinet. Al, our agent in the camp, suspects him, and that guy has eyes and ears everywhere.”

“But no obvious financial gain.” Deacon pondered the same thing he’d been thinking.

“Right.”

“Why else would he do it?” Deacon stopped and looked at him. “What about blackmail?”

“He’s being blackmailed to do it?” Ronan frowned. “Could be a reason. Why the fuck didn’t I think of that?”

“Because I’m smarter than you?” Deacon said and was punched in his arm as a reward for the smartass comment.

He tapped his ear and laughed as Deacon unsuccessfully tried to punch him back.

“Dude.”

“Go, Skipper.”

“What if someone was blackmailing our person inside to cut the fences?”

“Damn. All right, I’ll have Tink start looking for skeletons in closets. I’m almost through with the staff. I don’t have much hope. Jewell will have to take a crack at it. I’m not making any headway.”

“That works. Nobody’s leaving the country anytime soon.” Which was a damn good thing. A foreigner would have limited ability to travel in the country and even a more limited way to get out of the country without going through ports of entry Guardian could monitor.

“I’ll get the info to you as soon as possible. Tink and I are working doubles to get it all processed.”

“I’ll mention that to your employer and see if we can get you a raise in pay.”

“Nah, just a week off so we can sleep.”

“Deal,” Ronan said and terminated the connection.

“He should have the financial information tomorrow. His methods are coming up with goose eggs, so he’s up-channeling it to Jewell.”

“Hopefully, that’ll give us the information we need.”

“We need to discuss tomorrow’s convoy.”

“Want my team to drive the transport trucks?”

“Yeah, and Jug, he’ll be driving the bogus transporter with the fifty. We’ll take yours in the same truck and change it if necessary. A Jeep with Wraith and I in front and Stryker and Wolf will be in the back. Everyone armed to the teeth.”

“Did I mention I brought you some noisemakers?”

Ronan nodded and accepted another piece of candy from his brother. “You did. What did you snag?”

“Had some leftover rockets for the SMAWs. Figured you could never have too many.”

“So true. So true.” Ronan chuckled. “If we’re hit tomorrow, it could get dicey.”

“For them.” Deacon sighed. “We just need to make sure the riders know to get the hell down as low as they can get if we stop.”

“I’ll tell them as they load up.”

“Yeah, you’re a bit more fluent in Arabic than I am.”

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“And you speak Mandarin better than I do.”

“Guess it evens out.”

“Usually does.” Ronan chuckled. “Heard from Mom or Dad?”

“Not much. Last I heard, they were in London. Frank and Amanda were with them. Since Dad officially stepped away, they’ve been all over the world. They said they wanted to do things before they couldn’t.”

“About time he gets to enjoy retirement.” Ronan laughed. “How many times did he un-retire?”

“Ten or twenty at least,” Deacon guessed. “Are you seriously considering a desk?”

Ronan nodded. “I am. It all depends on how things work out in the future, but I think Fleur and I have a good shot at one hell of a relationship.”

“She seemed nice. Intelligent. She’s hot, too.”

Deacon ducked the punch that time. “Mine, asshole. Stay away.”

“Dude, she only had eyes for you. That much was completely clear.” Deacon chuckled. “I’m happy for you.”

“You’ll find your woman.”

Deacon laughed and shook his head. "I'm not looking. Not yet. I need to run wild for a few more years."

"That's what I thought, and then bam, Fleur was there. I had no option. I walked straight into one of the best things that has ever happened to me."

"She it, huh?"

"Think so. It has happened so damn fast, but we're committed to giving it all we have. She'll come back to Colorado with me. Gabby's working on her clearance and a job. She's a project manager."

"Lord knows we have enough projects going on." Deacon chuckled and then tapped his arm. "Incoming."

Ronan turned to look in the direction Deacon indicated. Miller. "Alexander, what the hell is going on? More Guardians?"

Ronan crossed his arms over his chest, and Deacon mimicked his position. Miller's eyes grew wide as he bounced his gaze from one to the other. "Miller, my brother Deacon. Deacon, this is Miller Dupre, the camp lead."

Miller nodded at Deacon, and neither offered a hand. "Why wasn't I notified that there would be more Guardians in camp?"

"My brother happened to be in the area and offered help. I wasn't aware I needed to inform you of my decisions or actions. Children's Hope International hired me, not your organization. I told Fleur, who notified her superiors." Or he assumed she did. She was a rule follower.

"I need to know when we bring more guns into the camp," Miller blustered.

“Okay. There are more guns in camp,” Deacon said and cocked his head.

Miller narrowed his eyes. “Thanks,” he said snidely. Ronan tried to hide the smile at Deacon’s comment. He wasn’t too sure he managed when Miller narrowed his eyes further. “Does this mean you’re going to run convoys?”

“It does. Tuesday.” Which wasn’t a lie.

“Where are you going?”

“To whatever camp will take them.” Ronan nodded toward the huts and tents. Again, not a lie but not all the information either. “The more we draw down, the less you’ll need to stress, Miller. We’ll stop the bastard cutting the fence by moving all the people.”

Miller rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s true.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Ronan offered the man a piece of candy. Miller shook his head, so Ronan opened it and asked, “Why is this camp closing?”

“Huh?” Miller blinked up at him.

“Well, see, my sister is on a multi-national board that works with NGOs, and from everything she knows, this country needs more camps, not less. She’s talking to the UN to try to determine who gave the orders to shutter the camp.”

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Miller said nothing for a long time then shook his head. “I have no idea. I just got the orders to send them out and shutter it.”

“From who?” Deacon asked.

“Shit, that was almost a year and a half ago. I’d have to find the paperwork.” Miller rubbed the back of his neck again. “I can look for it for you.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Ronan said.

“Yeah.” Miller nodded. He looked at Deacon. “Good to meet you.”

“And you,” Deacon said, and they watched as Miller headed back toward his tent. “I can’t read him.”

“Exactly. I want to believe he’s innocent, but ...”

“There’s a niggling in your gut. Mine, too,” Deacon finished.

“Exactly.”

CHAPTER 22

Ronan held Fleur last night as she slept. He was fully clothed and caught a couple of hours before getting up at four-thirty in the morning. Stryker and Wolf had been relieved by Ace and Rip so they could grab some shuteye before the convoy left. Ronan checked his weapon, ammo, and the fifty in the back of the truck and

positioned the SMAWs in the lead and trail Jeeps before Deacon exited his team's tent. "Sorry, man, jet lag."

His team came out after him. Wraith laughed. "Y'all look like you partied too hard."

Ranger groaned. "Jet lag is worse than a hangover. Where's the food?"

"Got some breakfast MREs over here and some not-so-great coffee, come on," Wraith called them over.

Deacon made his way over to him. "Sorry, man, jet lag."

"No worries. I'd rather you get some shuteye and be alert." Ronan glanced at the IDP camp. People were up and moving. "We'll move the trucks into position after you get some food. I'll inform Miller before we move the vehicles and let him know what we're doing."

"Noticed he didn't bring us the documentation yesterday." Deacon yawned and stretched. "Doesn't seem to be in a hurry, does he?"

Ronan shook his head, staring at Miller's tent. "Nope, and that's another strike against him."

"Make sure Fleur knows to be careful," Deacon said. "Let's grab some of that not-so-good coffee."

Ronan moved with his brother. "We talked about it again last night before we went to sleep. She knows, and she promised to be careful around him."

"Good." He took a cup of coffee from Wraith. "You should come to my team and cook for us."

Wraith laughed. “Not a chance in hell. I like it here. No offense.”

“None taken.” Deacon smiled and took a sip of the coffee. “This is better than the swill Ranger makes.”

“Ah, screw you, Cap. I messed up once, which had its benefits. No one asks me to make coffee anymore.”

All of Deacon’s team laughed at Ranger. As all the team members settled around the fire pit and ate, Ronan addressed them. “We aren’t expecting to be hit today, but we aren’t letting our guard down. Jug has the fifty and ammo in his truck. I want him in the middle of the convoy, and everyone is nose to tail. No room for any daydreaming. They want these people on the way to camp and any supplies or resources we have on the way back. Seven staff members have been killed on recent convoys.”

“Were they armed?” Ace asked.

“No,” Deacon answered for Ronan.

“What about the militia?” Bandit asked. “Aren’t they supposed to protect the convoys?”

“They were paid as escorts. When the shooting started, they bailed.”

“Fucking cowards,” Ranger ground out.

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“We’ve gone through all those emotions already,” Wraith said.

“We have,” Ronan added. “You have ten minutes to finish and get ready. We have a long hard drive there and back today. We aren’t leaving the camp unattended overnight.”

“They okay without us today?” Rip asked, nodding toward the IDP camp.

“They were without us for over four years. The militia on the posts will keep the radical components away, and we’ll be back by nightfall.”

When Fleur came out of her tent looking like a million bucks, he made his way over to her. “Hey, we’re ten minutes away from moving the vehicles. I’ll go over and talk to Miller.”

“Be safe.” She reached up and cupped his cheek in her hand. “I just found you. I can’t lose you.”

“We’re prepared and ready for anything that happens. But I’ll be careful. The same goes here. Remember, be cautious around him.”

“I know. I promise.” When she toed up, he kissed her. “Make your calls and keep your eyes open.”

“I’m heading to my tent to make the calls. Be safe.” He stared at her, wanting to tell her how important she was to him, but they’d said those words last night as they whispered to each other. Words of commitment and filled with all the feelings he

never thought he'd find. However, he pulled himself away and walked to Miller's tent.

"Yo, Miller."

"Yeah. Hold on." The man came to the flap. "Yeah, what's up?"

"We're taking a convoy today."

"What?" The man rubbed his face and looked past him to the Guardian tents.
"What?"

"We are taking a convoy today. Fleur is making the notifications. Camp Seven can take almost all your people, and we're putting a jump on it."

"But we need to inform the IDPs." He blinked and rubbed his face again.

"They've been informed, and now, you have. Was there any luck finding that documentation?"

"Documentation? Oh, no. I forgot. I'll look today. You'll be back tomorrow? Are my staff driving? Fleur?"

"No. Just Guardians."

"Oh, okay. Sorry, I didn't sleep well last night. I need coffee."

"You get that. We'll be gone shortly."

"Okay. All right. Be safe."

“Thanks.” Ronan left, once again confused about the man. His actions were completely opposite of what he’d expected.

Wraith glanced at him and then a double-take. “What’s up?”

“Fucking Miller. Just when I think I have him pegged ...”

Wraith glanced back at the tent. “What happened?”

“The fucker was kind and considerate. Told us to be safe.”

“And ...”

“I’m used to him being prickly and an asshole. Things with that guy do not measure up.”

Wraith sat in the driver’s seat. “We should know soon, right?”

“Today on financials. Hopefully, that will give us some idea of who’s involved.”

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“Yeah.” Wraith sighed. “Wish we could be in two places at once. Don’t like leaving the camp.”

“Yeah, but our orders are to move these people, not guard the camp. The militia is doing what we asked them to do. We have to trust them to do it for another day at least.”

“Want me to go over and give some monetary enticement to Habib?”

Ronan smiled. “Wouldn’t hurt. Get some money out of the box.”

“I’ll take Ranger with me. We’ll be back before you have to move the vehicles.”

“That works.”

He watched Wraith hustle into the tent and whistle for Ranger. The man’s head popped up. “Yo?”

“Come with me. We’ll be right back,” Wraith said.

Ranger was up and moving without any questions. Ronan went over each vehicle again, as did the rest of the men. “Fire up the vehicles. I’ll drive Ranger’s over.”

The process of loading each of the trucks was quick. Fleur, Tammara, Rana, and several others ticked people’s names off the list as they entered the trucks with all their earthly possessions, which wasn’t much. Hell, it wasn’t anything. Ronan spoke to each truck’s passengers as they were secured in the back of the transport. He made

sure they knew they were to get down and stay down until he told them they could get up if the convoy suddenly stopped. It wasn't the first time these people had been in danger, and no one asked any questions. They were only hoping for a better place at the journey's end.

"Dude, we're ready. Put Cobra team on our comms, please."

"Roger that, Skipper." Dude was silent for a moment. "Cobra One, this is Panther Six. Do you copy?"

"I do. Glad to join the network for a while." Deacon's voice called out to his team members, and they answered. He finished with, "Cobra Team is ready."

Ronan went down his list. "Panther One and Two are ready. Panther Three?"

"Ready," Jug said.

"Panther Four?"

"Ready," Stryker said.

"Panther Five?"

"Good to go, Skipper."

"Let's move out. Dude, how long do you have satellite?"

"For your trip there. The trip back, you'll be without coverage for about half the trip."

"The way there is more important. We need to keep these people safe." Ronan glanced over at Wraith. "What did Habib say?"

“He said he would make sure nothing happened at the camp.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yeah. I have half of his money in my pocket.” Wraith grinned.

Ronan laughed. “Yeah, that would do it.”

The road was mostly paved. There were a few places where they had to go off-road to avoid bombed-out areas, but the trip went fast and without hindrances. They offloaded the personnel, loaded supplies that had been staged and were waiting for the convoy, fueled up, and left within an hour of getting to Camp Seven.

“Skipper, I’m losing coverage. Another satellite will be overhead in two hours.”

“Copy. Everyone keep your eyes open,” Ronan reminded his men.

Ronan kept his head on a swivel. He doubted there would be an attack. It seemed Al was right. Miller left the camp to call in the convoy, and he could do that on his day off without anyone missing him. Fuck. Everything pointed at the man.

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“Skipper, Jewell found something.”

“Put Cobra One on this, too,” Ronan said.

“Copy. Cobra One, you’re online with Skipper.”

“Got yah. Go ahead.”

“Jewell found the money.”

“Miller?”

“Not only Miller. He had help. Mathias Gentry.”

Ronan swore, “What? Explain that.”

“Miller and Gentry were connected back in the States. They owned a construction company together. They sold it and made a killing, but the people they sold it to have open charges against them for massive fraud. And guess what? They took jobs overseas but aren’t employed by an NGO any longer. They’re there without permission, working as if they still had the jobs done away with when the NGO they were working for stopped operations in the country. None of the other NGOs knew Dupre and Gentry weren’t employed and just kept doing what they’d been doing. So, basically, they’re invisible.”

“What about their families?” Deacon asked.

“Neither of them has any immediate families.”

“Fuck. Mathias said he had daughters. How much money have these fuckers earned by selling these people and information on the convoys?”

“Millions, and get this, Tink and I worked with Con last night tracking this shit down. The camp hasn’t been closed by anyone. They’ve arranged to purchase the land the camp is on via a shell company. They’re buying it for the mineral rights under the valley.”

“The host country is allowing them to buy land?” Deacon sounded as confused as he was.

“Nope. They formed a foreign-registered company. The person buying the land is a local national named Habib Hamza. Dupre and Gentry own the company, and Habib is their agent of record.”

“Habib?” He turned to look at Wraith. The man frowned at him and mouthed, What? Ronan held up a finger. “The local militia rep is called Habib.”

“Fuck.” He could hear Dude’s fingers flying across the keyboard. “How did I miss that?”

“I don’t think I ever told you. There was no need.” Ronan swore. To Wraith, he said, “Floor this bitch.”

The trucks took their cue from Wraith and flew down the deserted highway. Deacon asked, “Can you get eyes on the camp?”

“No, sir.” He could hear the pain in Dude’s voice. “Not for another two hours.”

“Call them,” Ronan said. “Al is working the comm center. I need to make sure Fleur and Shelly know what the hell is going on. Al can get them out of there and keep them safe until we return.”

“Initiating sat phone call, I’ll put him on the line with you, Skipper.”

Ronan waited for what seemed like hours before he heard Al’s voice. “Al, this is Ronan. It’s Miller and Mathias. They’ve been confirmed as the agents inside the fence. Get Fleur and Shelly and get them out of the camp. I’ll meet you where we met before.”

“I copy.” The line disconnected.

“Skipper, incoming!” Wolf’s voice cracked over the comms. “Shots fired from our six.”

Ronan tapped his comm device and yelled, “All drivers, we have incoming!” They knew what to do, and those massive trucks slammed on their brakes at the same time. When he could, Jug pulled his truck sideways in the road. Wolf and Stryker shot around them and turned. Wolf lifted to the affixed machine gun and strapped himself in. Stryker hit the gas as Ronan strapped himself into the brace attached to the machine gun on his Jeep. Wraith floored it as he drew the charging handle back. The drivers of the trucks deployed, and Jug dropped the canvas on the truck, concealing the fifty-cal.

“On your right. East side.” Deacon’s voice snapped Ronan’s attention to the east. Five vehicles flew up at a breakneck speed.

“We’ve got east,” Ronan said as Wraith veered off the paved road.

“We’ve got south,” Stryker said. The sound of the M-240 mounted on the other Jeep

barely made it to his ears as they raced toward the vehicles. A rocket flew past them and exploded into one of the vehicles.

“Take that, fuckers.” Deacon’s words hit him right before another missile flew past. It exploded between two of the trucks, making both swerve. One rolled, and the other driver managed to save the vehicle. Ronan hit the trigger and started spraying the vehicles with armor-piercing bullets. The faction returned fire, and another missile exploded. Ronan spun and shot at three men who were firing at them. The sound of bullets hitting the Jeep registered, but Wraith kept the vehicle going. Ronan spun and sprayed bullets as they barreled past the vehicles.

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“Reloading!” Ronan grabbed the belt-fed ammo, opened the top of the machine gun, stripped out the old belt, and slapped in the new one. He slammed down the cover and charged the weapon as Wraith arched and headed back to the attackers. Wraith pulled his M-4 out of the carrier and fired as they approached. Ronan sprayed each of the vehicles with the M0240. They circled again and made their way back. This time, Wraith slowed and then stopped. They looked at the Jeep and then at each other. Ronan unstrapped and jumped down from the Jeep, catching his M-4 when Wraith tossed it to him. He put the weapon’s selector on fire and approached the bodies strewn around the vehicles, but there was only one destination in his mind. He took his toe and turned over the first man he came to. With a sneer of disgust, he went to the second, then the third. Habib. So, it wasn’t the militant factions attacking the convoys. It was the militia. That’s how no militia were hurt.

Ronan tapped his ear. “Status.”

“Stryker is hit,” Wolf said.

“I’ll be fine,” Stryker replied.

“Wolf?” Ronan wanted confirmation.

“I can stop the bleeding, Skipper, but he needs stitches at least.”

“Deacon?” Deacon had a medic on his team.

“Bandit.” The man snapped the call sign.

“Already heading that way,” Bandit said.

“Cobra team?”

“Fine,” Deacon acknowledged.

“Habib is dead. It was the fucking militia that attacked us.”

“Skipper, incoming. From the north.” That was Jug.

“Fuck. Reload. Stryker?”

“I’m driving, I’ll drop Stryker beside Jug,” Wolf said.

“Bandit, take the M-240.”

“Already hooked up, Cap.”

“Holy shit, Cap, there’s a slew of them,” Bandit said.

Ronan jumped back into the Jeep, and they spun out, heading back to the convoy.

“Stryker, you’re oureyes. I want to know if they come from any other direction.”

“Copy, Skipper,” Stryker acknowledged.

“Jug, when do they come in range?” Ronan asked.

“About another thousand meters, Skipper.”

“Bandit, arch out to the West. We’ll split them to the East.”

“Copy.” The two Jeeps took off.

“Fire in the hole,” Deacon said. A missile flew straight from the center of the convoy and exploded before it got to the trucks.

“Fire,” Ranger said. Another missile flew as Ronan ensured his belt was full and his weapon was charged. The explosion split the convoy in half before they reformed and came straight at them again.

“They aren’t taking the bait,” Bandit said.

“Hold. They’ll come out,” Ronan said as they kept flying over the broken ground.

As Jug started firing, two more missiles flared at the same time. Ronan and Bandit opened fire, and the three outside vehicles peeled off to come at them. Fuck, the tactic was one he’d seen before. “These guys have training. Don’t let them cut you off.”

“Roger,” Wolf said.

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That was the last Ronan heard as a missile from one of the attacking trucks flew past them. It exploded just behind them. Ronan ducked down but kept firing. When one of the attacking vehicles blew up, Wraith drove them through the fireball. Ronan swiveled and fired. A hot sting slapped against his arm. He ground his teeth and kept firing. Explosions popped behind and ahead of them. Wraith was driving like a madman while keeping them from being in the sight of the vehicles that had been attacking. The boom, boom, boom of the fifty cal was a steady beat to the explosions and the higher-pitched staccato bursts from the sixties on the Jeeps. The thwap of bullets hitting the Jeep spun Ronan, and he opened fire on a truck that was attempting to ram them.

“Floor it!” Ronan yelled and fired at the driver. He watched as the man’s head exploded, and the truck jerked to the right, clipping the rear of their Jeep.

Wraith fought the Jeep for control as Ronan continued firing the M-240. The damn thing went up on two wheels and then slammed down on all four. Ronan’s ribs crashed against the fucking machine gun. “Go around to your left!” Ronan swiveled again. Wraith drove alongside Wolf. Ronan and Bandit peppered the ass of the remaining three vehicles, chasing them straight toward the fifty and the missiles.

“Peel off on three!” Deacon shouted. “One, two, three!”

Wraith swung radically to the left and Wolf to the right, pinning the accelerator to the floor. The telltale booming of the fifty started, and then the missile trails from the convoy to the vehicles. Ronan spun, keeping the trucks in his sights, and watched them explode in fiery balls of metal and fuel.

Wraith slowed the vehicle as Ronan swiveled, keeping his eyes open for any source of attack. “They were funded.” Deacon’s voice came over the comms. “New vehicles.”

“Trained, too,” Ronan said while scanning the debris for anything that could be a threat. “Status?” He glanced down at Wraith. “Wraith is hit.” There was a bloody rip on his arm.

“Scratch. You’re hit, too.”

Ronan frowned and glanced down at his arm. He moved it and then lifted it. “Just a graze.” It would need stitches, but it was minor. “I’ll live.”

“Bandit,” Deacon ordered his man to attend to the wounds with a single word.

“On it,” the man said.

“Wolf?” Ronan asked his man’s status.

“Think I’m okay, Skipper. Racked my head against the M-240’s mount when we almost flipped. Vision is a bit fucked.”

“Get him back to the convoy.” Ronan was immediately concerned. Anytime one of his men mentioned they might be okay, instead of shaking it off, they were hurt. Wraith started the Jeep in that direction.

Ronan dismounted the Jeep and winced. It wasn’t the arm because, although that ached like a bitch, too, his ribs reminded him that the metal support for the machine gun was a fuckton harder than his ribs.

Bandit had Wolf sitting on the passenger seat and was testing his eyes. “He has a

concussion and needs to be examined for a possible skull fracture.”

“Let’s get him to the camp. They have a doctor. Dude, get us an air evac.”

“On it, Skipper.” Dude’s reply was immediate.

“Skipper, you don’t need to do that,” Wolf said and then promptly swayed and puked on Bandit’s boots.

Bandit looked at him. “Yes, you do.”

“Let’s get Wolf settled and these vehicles moving,” Deacon said. Ronan couldn’t agree more. Miller and Mathias were going to pay a hefty price for fucking with them.

CHAPTER 23

Fleur moved through the camp while keeping her eyes on Miller. She stepped into the admin tent and visited with Rana as they removed the intake sheets from the active books and placed them into the transferred notebooks. The feeling of happiness that usually came with a convoy was mired in fear for Ronan, his brother, and their men.

A commotion at the militia camp drew her and Rana out of the tent. All but three vehicles pulled out of the camp and headed in the same direction the convoy had taken.

Rana wrapped her arms around herself. “That can’t be good.”

Fleur’s gut dropped as she glanced at her watch. “They should be at the camp already, shouldn’t they?”

Rana nodded. “It could be nothing.”

“Yeah.” She wished she could make herself believe it. Catching Miller leaving the dining tent, she stayed outside and waited until he returned to his tent.

Rana tapped her arm to get her attention. “If you don’t need me, I’ll go help with the sick-call line.”

“Of course, sure. I’m heading back to do some work on tomorrow’s convoy. We’ll tell the people who are going this afternoon.”

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“That sounds good,” Rana said. “They will be okay.”

“I know.” She smiled half-heartedly at her friend and watched the woman go to the hospital tent.

Fleur drew a deep breath and started back to the tent next to Miller’s, but she heard her name called. She turned and saw Mathias waving at her. Glancing back toward Miller’s tent, she grimaced. She needed to keep an eye on where Miller was ...

“Hey, Fleur.” Mathias jogged up to her. “Could you come help me? That girl is back in the tractor area and won’t come out. I don’t want her to get hurt.”

Fleur narrowed her eyes. “She was on the convoy this morning.”

Mathias nodded. “I know, we got that much out of her, but she said she was too afraid of the big trucks. She’s crying. I did my best dad act, but I can’t get her to come out.”

“Okay.” She followed Mathias. He detoured to the actual tractor area, and she followed him. “She’s down here.” He waved her after him and went down a steep ditch. Fleur hesitated and looked around the field where they kept the tractors. A ghost of a chill ran up her back. She slowed as she moved to where Mathias had disappeared. None of his men were in the area. “Mathias, where’s everyone at?”

“We’re digging a new latrine trench, all hands on deck. Come on, sweetie, Fleur’s here.”

Fleur peeked over the opening and gasped. Mathias pointed a rifle at her. “Walk

down that slope if you don't want to die where you stand."

"What are you doing?"

"Do it, bitch!" he yelled. "You've already lived longer than you should have. I'll drop you where you stand."

She knew if she went down that ditch, she'd never come back up. Her survival instinct kicked in, and she turned to run, but Miller was behind her. He had a handgun.

"What are you doing?" She started shaking. It was uncontrollable.

"I'm delivering on a promise," Miller snarled. "You were supposed to meet with associates of mine outside of camp. They're very interested in a blonde, blue-eyed woman. You'll make them a lot of money."

"Miller, you can't do this." She shook her head.

"I can and?—"

"Ms. Fleur? Ms. Fleur? You have a phone call at the admin tent." Adil called for her from the fence.

Oh, thank you, Jesus. "I'll be right there!" Fleur yelled back to him.

Miller turned, keeping his weapon out of sight. "Move or say another word, and I kill him." Over his shoulder, he yelled, "She's busy right now! She'll return the call!"

"Mr. Miller, the caller said it was urgent."

“Tell them what I told you, Adil!” Miller shouted at the man.

Fleur watched as Adil debated what to do. Finally, he lifted a hand and walked away.

“What are you hoping to gain from this?” she asked.

“That’s none of your fucking business. Now, get down there.” Miller walked up to her and grabbed her arm, turning her and pushed her forward.

Fleur stumbled into the ditch, landing on her hands and knees. A rifle barrel was shoved behind her ear. She felt the skin rip and hissed. “Why are you doing this?”

“Shut her up,” Mathias said. Miller came up from behind her and shoved a gag into her mouth. He taped it there with duct tape. The fear that had gripped her before moved over for the terror that hit her so hard she wanted to be sick. Her hands were yanked behind her, and once again, Miller used duct tape to bind her.

Miller said, “Habib confirmed the ISIL is assisting in taking out the Guardian convoy.”

Fleur gasped and twisted, looking at Mathias and Miller.

Mathias snorted. “Don’t worry, sweetie, where you’re going, none of your lovers will be able to follow. Are we ready?”

Miller nodded. “Habib will come back, circle the camp, and we’ll do away with the rest of the staff. The ISIL will arrive, and we’ll do a wholesale movement of all the rest of the people. Then we get the equipment, bury everything incriminating, and start drilling. As far as the rest of the world knows, the ISIL went on a rampage. We’re dead, allegedly.”

Oh, God, no! I can’t let that happen. Fleur ripped her arm away from Miller and

screamed, “No!” behind her gag.

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Mathias kicked the side of her knee, dropping her to the ground. “You don’t need your legs for what they sell you for.” He turned to Miller. “She’s more trouble alive. Let’s just put a bullet between her ears.”

“I made a promise. They want her. They have someone who’ll pay a lot for a pretty American woman.”

“Unless they drug her, she’ll be a hellcat.”

“Which is why I stole this from the medical tent.”

Fleur could see the syringe. She moved as far away from Miller as she could.

Mathias snorted. “I have the perfect place to hold her.”

“Good. Then after all the other staff are dead and the IDPs have been taken away, we’ll get her out and take her to Aleppo. Of course, we might have to teach her some manners before we do, just like we do the IDPs we market.”

Fleur shook her head. They were monsters. They were using the women, too? How could she not see this? How could she have stuck up for this man? Tears formed in her eyes because she was so mad. The stab of a needle burned her arm. Fleur jerked, but she continued to stare at Miller. She knew hatred now. It was a feeling she’d never allowed herself to internalize before, but she hated these men. Fleur fought the blackness. She needed to warn ...

“Skipper, you have incoming comms.”

He tapped his ear. "From whom?" They were flying down the highway and would be at the camp in a half hour.

"Alpha."

"Put him on and Cobra One, too."

"You have both Panther and Cobra One online, Alpha."

"Stay on the line, Dude," Alpha commanded.

"I just got a satellite call from Al. He said Miller had Fleur in the equipment yard. He tried to get her, but he saw a gun and didn't want to endanger her any further. He got the doctor and one of the local national women out. The women are waiting for you at the rendezvous point. We're working on the air evac. How's Wolf?"

"Concussed, and Bandit is worried about a skull fracture. He's vomiting and can't focus his eyes."

"Archangel is making calls trying to get us airspace permission. We have a Mercy team in Greece and are sending them to Jordan, which is the closest neuro hospital where we have doctors we've vetted and where Wolf will go. What other injuries do you have?"

"Bumps and scrapes." Neither he nor Wraith would be sidelined because of their injuries. Stryker was driving and could shoot. He'd stay with the team.

"Based on the information our operators are uncovering, Mathias Gentry and Miller Dupre have violated numerous international laws. Murder, sex trafficking, human trafficking, and not to mention, they've almost shuttered an entire IDP camp without host national authority, pointing at one organization when others ask questions. It

went well until the Children's Hope International contacted us because Fleur raised so many red flags."

"Do we have any intel on Fleur's whereabouts?" Ronan drilled down to his immediate concern.

"Satellite is still out of range. Al said he would return to the camp and try to find her. I couldn't talk him out of it, but I talked to the doctor, who assured me she and the other woman wouldn't leave and would wait for you while he returned."

"Why would they take Fleur as a hostage?" Deacon asked.

"Leverage," Ronan assumed. "She's mine. They'll use her against us."

Deacon made a sound of disagreement. "Think about it. Do you think they expect us to return? They sent a force against us. I assume they believe we've been taken out."

Ronan frowned and then smiled. "That means we have the element of surprise. They won't have the balls to do anything until Habib and his forces return. Two men against three thousand people or so wouldn't go too well."

Deacon agreed, "Exactly. We need the satellite online to ensure no one's approaching the camp, and in the meantime, we need to formulate a plan."

"I'll leave that to you," Alpha said. "I'll let you know as soon as we have airspace. And, gentlemen, those two men need to answer for their crimes, not only against us but against the IDPs. Take them in alive if at all possible."

"Copy," both he and Deacon said. That order was the only thing that was going to save the fuckers.

“Alpha, if Adil calls back, have him meet us at the equipment area behind the structures tent.”

“I copy, and I’ll be monitoring your channel,” Ronan nodded when Alpha confirmed he was listening in. The man knew every team tactic invented and had been the inventor of several. He would be an asset to have.

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Deacon asked, “Can we get to the rendezvous without being seen?”

He glanced at the sky. It was almost sunset. “Yes, but we need to leave the trucks and take in Wolf with the Jeep. No lights,” Ronan said. “And once that’s done, we circle the camp.”

“Hold on. Dude, put both teams, except Wolf, on comms.”

“Copy.” Dude was silent for a minute. “All team members except Wolf are on comms.”

Ronan gave the teams the skinny. “We’re going to deliver Wolf to the doctor. Bandit, you’ll drive him in and help her in any way you can. Jug and Stryker, what would be the best point of entry to get in and behind Gentry’s and Dupre’s tents?”

“The equipment yard,” Jug said.

“I agree. Go through the patch in the fence Mathias fixed after the last breach. Big enough for all of us and a M-240,” Stryker added.

“I can carry the M-240, Skipper,” Jug said. “Problem is, the fucker isn’t picky about what it kills. Anything in its path will be dead. That includes Fleur if she’s in the line of fire.”

“No, we’re going in dark. Both teams are down one because we’re leaving Bandit and Wolf with Shelly. We’re banged up, but we won’t have militia to worry about. If there’s anyone left on post, I’d be surprised.”

“I agree,” Wraith said over the comms. “Habib would have pulled them as soon as we left.”

“Concur,” Jug and Stryker said in unison.

The plan was solidifying. Ronan continued, “Cobra team will go after Mathias. Dude, we’ll need pictures of the fucker so Cobra can identify. They don’t know the camp, but when we come in, we’ll pass his tent. They’ll split off, and we’ll go after Miller. We’ll coordinate entry just in case one of the fuckers has the wherewithal to keep a weapon next to them. We’ll take Miller. Comms will stay on this interface. The IDPs will never know what’s happening, and neither will the rest of the staff.”

“Unless someone gets stupid,” Jug said.

“I hope like fuck they do,” Ronan replied. “But remember, they have Fleur. We might need them to get to her. We’ll go off-road five miles from camp and veer to where Shelly is waiting. We’ll go by Jeep as soon as we have a good cover for the trucks. No lights and little to no acceleration. The generators at the camp will mask our engine noise if we keep it low. After we drop off Wolf and Bandit, we’re on foot. Anyone who can’t hang physically needs to speak up now.”

There was nothing but silence on the comms. “Then let’s finish what they started. Whatever it takes.”

“As long as it takes.” Every last one of them said the words, and Ronan knew he’d march through the fires of hell to get Fleur and stop those bastards. Every man with him would be on his six. There was no force in the world more deadly than a Guardian who was in search of one of their own.

CHAPTER 24

As they slowly rolled onto the small road where he'd met Al for the first time, Ronan glanced at the sky. There was hardly any moon, which was good for them. But they needed to hurry. If the militia didn't return soon, Miller and Mathias might get antsy and bolt. What that meant for Fleur, he had no idea.

He stood up and motioned for the following Jeep to stop and cut the engine. "Shelly?" Ronan said quietly.

A rustle on his right brought every gun to bear on that side of the road. Shelly emerged and gasped, lifting her arms immediately. "Don't shoot."

"Wolf is bad," Jug said as he moved out of the Jeep and grabbed her arm.

"Where is he?" Shelly was instantly business.

"Back here." Jug moved her to the back Jeep.

The bushes rustled again, and Rana appeared. She was met with the same weapons. "Ronan?" she squeaked.

"Yes, Rana, right?"

"Yes. I'm worried about Fleur. She was acting different. Suspicious. When the militia pulled out, we knew it was bad news."

"Tell me what was happening at the camp today." He needed as much intel as he could get. Rana rubbed her arms. "The normal things. The day wasn't any different. People were lined up for lunch; there was enough food, and no one went without. The hospital line was longer than normal. Several of the staff had injuries from digging the latrine areas. Blisters from shovel work, one had a swollen ankle from twisting it in a hole they were digging. Miller was checking on the dig. He was with Mathias for

a long time. I think Fleur was watching them, but ...” She shook her head. “Nothing was out of the ordinary except your convoy and the militia ... oh, the ones on post left right after you did. A Jeep came and collected them all. But there are only three vehicles left at their camp.”

Ronan nodded. “Thank you. Do you know where Al went?”

“To find Fleur.” She looked at Shelly. “He told me he saw Miller with a gun. He didn’t want to worry Shelly, so he only told me. Why would Miller have a gun?”

“Miller isn’t who he represented himself as, Rana. We’re going to take care of that.”

“And Fleur?”

He closed his eyes momentarily. “I’ll find her. Come hell or high water, I’ll find her, and if they hurt her, they will pay.”

Rana stared up at him. “Good.”

“Rana, come help me, please,” Shelly called to her, and the woman looked at him for permission. When he nodded, she moved quickly to Shelly’s side.

“We ready?” Deacon asked him.

Ronan mentally surveyed his equipment and then looked at his men. They were there and ready. “Let’s do it,” he said.

They set out in a quick jog that ate up the terrain between them and the camp. Before they emerged in the clear zone of the camp, Ronan led them down to the equipment area. No outposts were manned by militia, so no one would see them coming. Still, they moved quietly and low-crawled across the clearzone slowly but with purpose. Ronan signaled for the cutters. Wraith fished them out of Jug’s pack and handed them to him. He snapped the plastic ties that kept the wire mesh in place. A bullshit patch job at best. Fucker was planning on using this hole again, that much was obvious.

He pushed the mesh in and went through. He navigated through the equipment and stopped. Something was off. He turned and looked at Wraith. “Where’s the tractor?”

Wraith spun and examined the equipment. “Unknown.”

Ronan waited for each of the men to get through the opening in the fence. When they had, he advanced to the area behind the structure tent. He held for a moment to ensure he didn't hear anyone in the tent before using the cutters. This patch was done well, of course. This patch was the one Ronan had watched the fucker fix. After he'd made the hole. The son of a bitch. Ronan worked as quickly as he dared. The sound of metal snipping was distinct, but there was no one around. The tent was dark. Which meant Miller and Mathias had told the night crew not to worry about showing up.

He bent the wire mesh in and moved through the hole. He moved to the corner of the tent and examined the route forward, noting little movement in the camp. People were settling in for the night. Wraith tapped him on the shoulder, letting him know everyone was through the opening. He nodded and moved out.

They advanced to the junction of the pathway, and he looked back and found Deacon. In sign language, he told his brother, "Left. Fourth tent, this side."

Deacon nodded and signed back, "Rear entry."

Ronan nodded and signed, "Wait for my signal."

Deacon nodded. Ronan and his team moved right, leaving Deacon and Cobra team to handle Mathias. He moved, and as one, his team followed. A laugh and conversation from one of the tents they were passing froze the entire team. Ronan held his fist up and waited. When no one exited, he released his fist and moved.

They made it to Miller's tent. Ronan knew exactly where the fucker's bed was, but he knew Miller wouldn't be in bed. He'd be waiting for Habib to come back. He positioned himself behind where Miller's desk would be while Wraith stood quietly with his Interceptor 911 poised to slice through the canvas. The knife was older than he was, but it was sharper than a fucking razor.

Ronan looked at the rest of his team and received nods. He held his earpiece for three seconds to send the emergency sound through it. Dude's voice came across the comms, "Standby. In three, two, one, go."

Wraith stabbed through the canvas and used his body weight to shred the canvas. Ronan was the first in the tent. There was no one in the desk area. He rushed through to the bed. Nothing. "Empty."

"Same." Deacon's voice informed him.

"Where the fuck are they?" He moved to the front of the tent and peered through a crack in the flap.

"Satellite is online, Skipper. How can I help?"

"Keep an eye open for anyone approaching and look for anything unusual." Ronan looked at Wraith. "Would they be waiting for Habib at the militia's camp?"

"Could be." He nodded. "They weren't in the structure tent."

"Deacon, rendezvous my location."

"Copy."

"Skipper, there are no vehicles active except the one at the edge of the camp. From the magnification, it looks like a tractor. Two human heat signatures. The camp is full of heat signatures, but none that are on the move."

Ronan frowned. "What edge?"

"Ah, southern," Dude said.

“What the fuck are they doing?” Ronan walked out of the tent. Deacon’s team was there moments later. “Southern edge?”

“Yes, in a minute.”

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“Wraith, Jug, our camp, NVGs.”

“Copy.” Both men moved like apparitions across the open expanse, and he watched as his men went into the tent and then checked Fleur’s tent before coming back.

He glanced at Wraith in question, and Wraith noted, “Had to make sure Al wasn’t setting us up.”

Ronan nodded. Wraith was one suspicious son of a bitch, and he was damn glad he was on his side. His men handed out the NVGs then moved using the clear zone to keep away from tents. Since the clear zone was only lit on one side, closest to the militia camp, they made fast time.

As they approached, they dropped and worked their way closer, keeping out of sight. Ronan lowered his NVGs and looked across the darkness, careful to avoid looking toward the tractor’s headlights. He could see Mathias on the tractor and Miller on his hands and knees near the front of the damn thing. What the fuck were they doing?

“You see this, Deacon?”

“Yes. Are they digging something up or burying it?”

“Don’t know. But that’s them.” He searched for Fleur but didn’t see her.

“Where’s your woman?” Deacon asked.

“I don’t know. But they do,” Ronan said. “Ready?”

“Give us five minutes to get on the other side.” Deacon motioned for his team, and from years of practiced movements and hundreds of missions, his team expanded the space between them to encircle the targets completely.

The tractor sputtered to a stop, and Mathias got down. Ronan advanced, and his team followed suit. He crawled silently, working closer as he knew Deacon’s team would be doing.

Mathias lifted the cover of the tractor, and Ronan could hear the men arguing over something. Fixated on the men, he moved closer.

“Ready.” Deacon’s voice over the comms was fucking the best thing he’d heard all day.

“Now.” Ronan launched to his feet and lifted his weapon to firing position. His team advanced at a fast walk. When Miller saw them, it was too late. The man lunged for a rifle propped on the tractor’s tire. Jug’s shot echoed, splitting the silence. The tire on the tractor thwapped as the 5.56 bullet pierced the thick rubber. Miller’s arms went up immediately. Mathias spun and swore.

“Arms up, or you’re dead.” That was Deacon.

The sound of people behind them spun both of their heads. “Son of a bitch,” Mathias said. He feigned the attempt to lift his arms but instead lunged toward the rifle. Ronan’s finger squeezed the trigger of his M-4, and Mathias grunted and dropped. Miller shrieked like a little girl and lifted his hands higher.

“You’ll join him,” Ronan growled.

Miller shook his head. “You need me.”

“For what, you fucking bastard?”

“You’ll never find her if I don’t tell you where she is.”

Ronan walked up to the man and used the butt of his weapon to hit the man in the gut. Miller groaned and dropped to his knees. Ronan lifted his knee into the man’s chin and sent him flying backward. He handed his weapon to Wraith and lifted the man. His teeth were bleeding, and he had a bloody nose. “Tell me where she is, or I’ll spend the next twenty-four hours peeling your skin from your body.”

Miller spat at him. “You won’t. She’ll die if I don’t tell you where she is.”

“Knife.” Ronan held out his hand, and thatfucking massive Interceptor 911 was placed in his palm. “What you fail to realize is I will, and if she dies, your death will be worse.” He placed the knife on the bridge of Miller’s nose and pushed down.

“Stop!” Miller squirmed, but Jug and Wraith pinned him against the tractor. Ronan lifted the blade and pulled. The skin that tore away from the man’s nose erupted in blood. Ronan cut the skin off at the tip of the nose. Miller’s scream was piercing, and people started pouring out of the camp's tents.

Ronan grabbed the man’s cheeks and shook him. “Where is she?”

Miller wasn’t listening. Ronan got his attention by pushing the knife over one ear. The man cried, “No, no, don’t. Please.”

“You have a way to stop this. Where. Is. She?” Ronan sneered. “I can keep you alive for a long, long time. This isn’t my first rodeo.” He applied pressure to the top of Miller’s ear.

“Buried. We buried her!” Miller shrieked.

“Here?” Ronan pushed the man to the dirt.

“Yes, yes.”

“How the fuck is she going to get air?”

“The tube.” Miller pointed.

Wraith was there in an instant. “A fucking gardenhose. You think this would give her enough air?” Wraith’s teeth bared. “Jug, the tractor.”

“Stryker, your arm won’t tolerate digging. Take this motherfucker, and if he moves an inch, take his ear.”

“You got it, Skipper.”

“It won’t start.”

“Ace, get it working,” Deacon said. “We need tools.”

“What’s going on out here?”

Ronan spun. There were about ten men from the camp. “Miller and Mathias buried Fleur alive.”

“What?” the leader of the structures team asked. “What are you talking about?”

“They’re the ones cutting the holes and sacrificing the IDPs. They informed on the convoys.” Ronan pointed at Miller.

The man looked at Miller. “Is that true?”

Stryker held the knife against the man’s ear. “Tell him.”

“Yes!” Miller squealed. “Yes!”

“We need shovels. The tractor stopped!” Deacon yelled.

“I can fix the damn thing.” The man approached. “It’s a temperamental bitch.” He elbowed Ace out of the way. “Here, the wire fell off again.” The man looked at Jug. “Try it again.”

Jug hit the start button, and it fired up. “We can help.” The lead whistled. “Red team. Picks and shovels, hurry, she won’t have long.”

The men ran back to the camp. “What about him?” the lead asked, pointing at Mathias.

“He’s dead,” Jug said.

“You move him. I’ll move the dirt,” the lead said, changing places with Jug.

“The hose giving her air is here.” Ronan picked up the length of hose.

“Keep an eye on it. I’ll work away from it, but if we snag it, she’s done,” the man said before powering up the tractor.

The other men arrived with shovels, and Ronan started digging out the hose, being careful not to disturb it. Before he knew it, there were more shovels than men on his team. He looked up and was amazed at what he saw. Not only was the structure’s team helping, but IDPs were using boards, plastic, and whatever they could to help

dig Fleur out.

Al was beside him with a shovel. He looked at Ronan. “The ones Habib left to protect them are dead.”

Ronan continued working. “You take them out?”

“Yes. They told me they were burying her. I ran here. I pray we’re not too late.”

“We aren’t,” Ronan grunted as he shoveled like a madman. He wouldn’t believe it. He couldn’t.

Time lost meaning. Dirt was the measurement. They were in a pit five feet deep before someone yelled. Ronan glanced up and stumbled over to an area about five feet from where they were still unburying the hose.

He fell to his knees and used his shovel to scoop away the dirt on the top of a fucking wooden box. He found where the hose was shoved through a hole. The fucking thing had space between the boards.

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He used his hands to jamb the shovel between the boards. “Here.” Deacon grabbed the shovel and gave him a hooligan tool. He pried the boards loose. Dirt fell into the box. “Fleur!” He ripped two boards off and grabbed a flashlight that someone was holding. He shoved his way into the box. She was there; dirt covered her body, but there was a cloth over her head. He lifted it away and placed his fingers on her throat. “Please, baby. Please be alive,” he whispered as he felt for a pulse. It was there. Thank God. He shouted, “She’s alive!”

A cheer rose around him as he flicked the cloth over her face before pushing himself back out of the box. “Careful, no more dirt,” he said, and they swept the dirt away. He used the tool and loosened the boards. When he could, he reached into the box and pulled her out.

He carried her to the pit's edge and handed her to Deacon, who was halfway up the five-foot drop. Turning carefully, Deacon handed her to Bandit. Ace grabbed Deacon’s hand, and Deacon grabbed his. They were up the wall in moments. Bandit had a blood pressure cuff on Fleur already. Deacon asked what Ronan was wondering, “Why are you here?”

“We heard everything and knew we would be needed. Shelly should be ...”

“Move, please. Get out of my way, please, move.” Shelly elbowed through the crowd of people with her medical bag. “Was she knocked unconscious?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan said as he dropped to his knees. “Stryker, get that fucker to tell you what he did.”

“Ah, Skipper, he’s not in my custody anymore.”

Ronan lurched to his feet simultaneously as did Ace, Deacon, and Bandit. “What the fuck?”

The women of the camp had surrounded Miller and begun pushing him toward the pit. “Should we stop them?” Deacon asked.

“How are you going to do that? Shoot them?” Ronan asked. Miller was shoved and fell five feet into the pit. He landed on his leg wrong, and fuck, that had to be broken. Only it wasn’t the end of what the women had in store for him. The first rock flew into the pit, striking Miller in the chest. Ronan watched as each woman in the camp stepped forward and took turns stoning the man who was guilty of so much treachery.

Al was beside him. “My people tell me government forces are investigating what happened to the convoy. They’ll be here by morning.”

He looked down at Fleur to see Shelly had an IV started. “I don’t see any head or neck trauma,” Shelly said and looked up at him. “We need to take her to the hospital tent. Wolf is there.”

“I’ll carry her.” Ronan leaned down and picked her up. “Wraith, Deacon, you have mop up.”

“Copy,” both men acknowledged.

“Alpha, any word on the air evac?” Ronan asked as he walked through the crowd, waiting their turn to throw a stone at Miller.

“Thirty minutes out. Jordanian helicopter and crew. What about Mathias and Miller?”

Ronan answered, “Mathias went for a weapon. He’s dead. Miller ...”

Deacon finished for him, “The women are stoning him.”

“Repeat that?” Shocked, Alpha asked for clarification.

“Stoning. Throwing rocks. They found out he was inside the camp and informing on the convoys.”

“How did they find that out?”

“Fuck if I know,” Deacon said. “I don’t want to be killed, so I’m not stopping them.”

“Nothing will stop them,” Jug said. “This is their justice.”

“Doesn’t bode well for the inquiries that’ll be coming.” Alpha sighed.

“From whom?” Ronan asked as he carefully walked toward the medical tent. Shelly was right beside him, carrying the IV.

“Every NGO that was lied to, the host national government, and the UN.”

Deacon chuffed, “So, just about everyone.”

“Yeah,” Alpha said. “We’ll peel it back and find the answers. Do we have someone who can stay and take control of the camp until we know what the hell is going to happen to it?”

“We can, Alpha.” That was Deacon. “Panther One has two down. We’ll make sure the IDPs get moved or stay safe if they aren’t going to close down.”

Ronan looked at the woman in his arms. “Jug and Wraith can stay to help. Stryker, Wolf, and I will fly to Jordan. Once I know my people are safe, Stryker and I will return.”

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There was a long, quiet pause on all the comms. “Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

He gritted his teeth and answered, “Hell no, Uncle Jacob. It’s the last thing I want to do, but it’s my responsibility to see this mission through to the end. Once they’re safe, I’ll return. Whatever it takes isn’t just a motto to me. It’s in my blood. It’s my legacy, and I’ll answer that call every damn time.”

CHAPTER 25

Damn, she was thirsty. Fleur tried to peel her tongue from the roof of her mouth. It barely moved. She blinked and looked up at a metal-shielded lightbulb. That was different. Where was she?

“Hey.” Ronan appeared over her, and she smiled. Oh, this is a nice dream. If it weren’t for her tongue being superglued and made of sandpaper, she’d have been quite happy to go back to sleep. “Babe, can you open your eyes for me?”

Had she closed them? She lifted her eyelids. Man, when did they get so heavy?

“There you are. How are you feeling?”

She blinked at him and tried to talk, but superglue ... She pointed to her mouth and croaked, “Water.” She hoped it was intelligible enough to understand.

When a straw appeared before her, she groaned in relief and drained the cup quickly. “More,” she begged, dropping her head back down to the soft pillow. Wait.

Pillow?“Where?”

“We’re in Jordan in a hospital. We think Miller or Mathias gave you a shot of Ketamine. Your blood pressure was almost nonexistent when we found you.”

“Found me?” She frowned. “Miller ...” Oh, fuck. She tried to sit upright. “He’s going to kill the staff.”

Ronan cupped her cheek with his hand. “Don’t worry. Everything is over. Both Miller and Mathias are dead.”

She slid back onto the pillow. “Dead? What happened? What about your brother, the teams? Oh, shit, Shelly?”

Ronan narrowed his eyes. “Everyone made it. Miller and Mathias were in business with Habib. No one had ordered the shutdown of your camp. Miller manufactured all of it because they wanted the land where the camp sat. They purchased it with the money they made trafficking the women.”

“Your convoy and the guys?”

“We were attacked. Wolf has the most serious injury. A grade-three concussion. He’s next door. Adil was able to get Shelly and Rana out of the camp. When he tried to get to you, he said he saw Miller with a gun.”

“He did. Miller threatened to kill him if I didn’t cooperate. They made me go down into a ditch. I think they were planning on selling me.”

Ronan nodded. “The fuckers buried you in a crate.” He took her hand in his. “I’ve never been so fucking scared in my life.”

“Buried me? Alive?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “They gave you a garden hose for air. Fuckers didn’t think it might collapse under the weight of the dirt. Shelly said if you’d been breathing normally instead of barely breathing because of the drug overdose, you might not have had enough air to last.”

She closed her eyes and then opened them again. “I’m kind of glad they drugged me. I don’t do well in confined spaces.”

“It was pure luck they didn’t kill you.”

She placed her hand on his and felt tape. She lifted his hand so she could see his palm. “Bandages?”

He shook his head. “It’s nothing, a few blisters. Once you show up in a hospital, everyone seems to think you need your boobos fixed.”

“Is your brother okay?”

“He’s fine. Running things at the camp until I get back.”

She froze, and at that moment, everything coalesced into reality. All the fear, hatred, and emotions that had consumed her now flooded through her, and she began to shake. “Oh, God.” She lifted her hand to her mouth. “Miller and Mathias were going to kill everyone. They were going to have the militia surround the camp and have all the IDPs sorted and trucked out with the help of the ISIL.”

“That’s what we assumed. I’ll let Guardian know they were correct.” He moved onto the bed and pulled her into him. Her shaking stopped when he held her tight against him. “You’re okay. You’re safe. I promise you’re safe.”

“I know. I don’t know why I’m shaking like this.” She pushed into him and felt as he tightened his arms around her.

“Your brain and body are trying to come to terms with what’s happened.” His chest vibrated under her ear.

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She nodded. "When do you have to go back?"

"Tomorrow."

Okay, well, she could suck it up. "I'll go with you."

He laughed. "No, you won't."

She pulled away from him. "Why?"

"Because you're going to Colorado."

"I don't know anyone in Colorado." She shook her head. "I'll return to the camp with you and work until you leave."

He shook his head. "Nope. You and Shelly are on an outbound jet in two days. She's going with you to Colorado to settle you in my house, and then she's heading to Cincinnati. Jug will meet up with her either in Colorado or there when we're relieved of duty."

She frowned. "You've planned out everything very well, haven't you?"

"I had to do something." He took her hands in his. "Babe, I had zero control. The doctors weren't sure when you'd wake up, although they were positive you would. Shelly stayed with me until she almost passed out. I've been sleeping by your bed for the last two days. I was terrified that night. I thought I'd lost you. Going back to that camp is the last thing I want to happen for you. I want you to go to Colorado, meet

my insane sisters, learn about Guardian, about the job there for you, and be there when I finish this mission and come home. Please.”

She stared at those intense brown eyes. She didn’t like being bossed around without having any input. “If I do go back, this is the last time you make plans for me without my input. I love you, but you don’t get to control me.”

Ronan blinked, and then a smile formed. “Say that again.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You don’t get to control me, and that isn’t a challenge. That is a fact.”

“No, I get that. I promise not to do it again, but what did you say before that?”

Fleur frowned. “That I ...” Oh, shit. She dropped her eyes and stammered, “Ah ... I can’t remember.”

He shook his head and leaned closer. “You said you loved me.”

She shook her head. “You’re hearing things.”

The smile got larger. “No, I’m not. You said you love me.” He leaned in and kissed her below the ear. A shiver ran through her body. “That’s good, babe,” he said as he kissed her in the same spot. “Because when I found you in that crate that night, I knew I loved you.”

She turned so she could see him. “It’s too early.”

“It isn’t.” He shook his head. “Not for us, it isn’t.”

“What if we get back to the States, and you decide you don’t love me?”

He shook his head. “A bridge too far.”

“Huh?”

“Tactics one-oh-one. Never look to the future for problems. Deal with what’s at hand. We have these feelings for each other. That is a fact. We’ll take each day as it comes and won’t borrow problems by asking what if.”

“You’ll be gone a lot. Maybe you’ll find someone better for you.” She pulled her bottom lip in between her teeth. There were so many things that could go wrong.

He reached up to her chin and tugged her lip away from her teeth with his thumb. “I’m not made that way. You’ll see, trust me, Fleur. Trust me enough to take a chance at a life together. You said you would go to Colorado with me before. Don’t change your mind because big emotions are in play. You are mine. I am yours.”

She stared at him. All the fears, the questions, and the concerns ebbed away. He’d always had her trust, and he always would. “All right. I’ll go to Colorado, but only because I love you.”

He smiled and pulled her back into him, kissing the top of her head as he held her. “And I love you. I’ll be there as soon as humanly possible. I promise.”

CHAPTER 26

“What are you talking about?”

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Fleur sat across from Gabby, Ronan's older sister. The woman was beautiful and almost an identical image of her younger sister Charley. Well, except for attitude and demeanor. Fleur had been in Colorado for a month, and the sisters had visited her just about daily since she'd started staying at Ronan's house. Charley's husband, Dan, was a saint. Fleur had no idea how the man kept up with Charley. She was the battery bunny on steroids. But she really liked the woman. She and Gabby had also settled into a wonderful friendship.

"What I'm talking about is a position as project manager for all the international charity work that Guardian funds. I've talked to Mom, and she agrees that we need someone to keep an eye on our interests full-time. She's traveling with Dad and has let things float down to me. I'm too busy keeping Charley from driving Jason insane."

"I heard that!" Charley called from the kitchen.

"I don't care!" Gabby called back. "It is a significant undertaking; you'd have whatever staff you need."

"Staff? How many charities do you fund?"

"Ah, we fund and manage six and own two." Gabby handed her a folder about three inches thick.

"The annual salary is on the top page," Gabby said, taking her drink from Charley. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome. Fleur, here’s yours.”

Fleur took the glass of chardonnay and opened the folder. She slapped it shut again and handed it to Gabby.

“What’s wrong?” Gabby said, taking the folder back.

“You made a mistake on the salary.”

Gabby opened it and frowned. “Did you want more?”

“More!” Fleur shrieked the word. “That is too much!”

Charley reached over and flipped the folder open. “No, that’s what others doing the job are being paid. I helped with the research.”

Gabby handed the folder back to her. “That’s our offer. Of course, we’d understand if you don’t want to work with charities anymore.”

“No, it’s not that. My knowledge of the NGOs would be beneficial, but that salary is way too much.” A large single-digit number with six zeros behind it. Her mind had shattered at the thought of that much money in a lifetime, let alone in a year.

Gabby smiled and took a drink of her wine. “Consider the position. Look at the charities, the boards, and the members. The charters are in that folder, along with the financial breakdown of each charity. We don’t align ourselves with charities that pay their management more than they disperse to the needy. As a matter of fact, we only have one that is above twenty percent to management.”

“Yeah, because that’s Mom’s pet charity, and it sits at twenty-three percent to management.” Charley sipped her drink, which looked like some kind of brown

liquor. “Well, management and the procurement of the dogs. We search out reputable breeders and trainers. Those dogs are lifesavers for our military and first responders.”

“I’ll consider it.” Fleur shook her head. “But, man, that is a sticker shock.”

Gabby chuckled. “I can imagine.” She glanced at her watch.

“Are you late for something?” Fleur had noticed her looking at her watch a lot tonight.

“What? No, not at all. So, tell me, did you find everything you needed in New York?”

“We did,” Charley said and smiled brightly. “She didn’t want to spend money on clothes, but we had Ronan’s black card, so he bought anything that looked good on her. He just doesn’t know it yet.” The woman laughed and swirled her drink. “I love spending their money.”

“Which I will repay.” Fleur pointed at Charley.

Charley snorted. “Fat chance of that happening. He’s going to show up and be all ‘me man, me protect’,” Charley grunted.

“Actually, it’s more like ‘me man, you woman’.”

Fleur spun and jumped out of the chair. “Ronan!” She ran across the floor and launched into Ronan’s arms. She wasn’t sure if she was laughing or crying, but she was holding the man who meant the world to her.

His lips found hers, and dear God, the magic between them flamed into existence again.

She laughed when he broke the kiss and spun her around. “Stop, I’ll get dizzy.”

When he put her back on her feet, she noticed that his brother, Wraith, and Ranger were also there. She smiled and felt her face blush with heat. “Hi.” She made a dorky wave movement with her hand.

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Wraith and Ranger smiled, and Deacon laughed before saying, “I was wondering if you were going to notice anyone else in the room.”

“Hey, leave her alone.” Gabby hugged her brother while Charley whooped and flew at Wraith. He caught her, and they both laughed like loons. Charley then jumped at Ranger and got the same treatment. Fleur looked at Gabby. “I take it you know Wraith and Ranger?”

“Almost all their lives.” She nodded.

“We’re honorary cousins,” Charley said and punched Wraith in the arm. “They’re dorks, but they’re our dorks.”

Wraith shook his head. “This is why we come home; to be mistreated by wicked little sprites.”

“Hey, I’m not a sprite.”

“No, she’s just wicked,” Ranger said, ducking behind Wraith as she tried to slug him, too.

Wraith caught Charley and held her at arm’s length, keeping the woman from damaging either of them. Fleur had the idea that if she wanted to, she could do some serious damage to the guys, but they were all playing.

“It’s been great to get punched and all, but we have a drive to get to our folks’.”

Fleur stopped him. “Wait. Could you tell me what your names are? I mean, you all worked so hard to help us. I’d like to know who I’m thanking.”

Wraith glanced at Ronan, who nodded and looked at Fleur. He winked. “Talon. Talon King. This is my actual cousin, Reece.”

“Also a King,” Reece said. He lifted his chin in the direction of the door. “Ready?”

Talon let go of Charley and laughed when she almost fell down. “I am. Let’s hit it.”

“Before you go, I wanted to say thank you. Ronan told me what happened and how everyone helped to dig me out.”

Wraith smiled and nodded. “No worries. You’d have done it for us. The IDPs worked just as hard as we did, and they did it because they knew and respected you. Enjoy your time off, Skipper.”

“See yah, Cap,” Reece said to Deacon, and the men left.

“Honorary cousins?”

“Our parents are close with their family and have been for a long time,” Ronan said, wrapping her up in both arms. “Now, I believe I need my house, people.”

“Geez, like, excuse us for welcoming you home,” Charley mocked him.

“Come on, Bambi, you can welcome me home.” Deacon laughed and ducked the fist heading his way.

“Do. Not. Call. Me. That,” Charley said as she tried and failed to catch Deacon.

Gabby grabbed her wrap and shook her head. “You’d think running the largest security company in the free world would mature her.”

“Never.” Ronan laughed. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, you will.” Gabby laughed as she walked out of the small sitting room toward the kitchen where Deacon and Charley laughed.

“What’s happening tomorrow?” Fleur asked as he folded her into his arms.

“Mom and Dad are coming home. We’ll go over for dinner.”

He dropped to kiss her, but she ducked it. “No, no, no. Is this dressy? What should I wear? Oh, are they going to like me? I need to bring something. I can’t go empty-handed.” She spun to walk away from him, but he caught her.

“Later. Plenty of time to stress meeting the ‘rents afterward.”

Fleur turned in his arms. “After? After what?”

She blinked her eyes comically, and he laughed. “After this.” He bent down and tossed her over his shoulder. She shrieked and then laughed as he strode down the hallway to the bedrooms. He opened the master bedroom and stopped. “Where are your things?”

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“In the other bedroom.” She pointed across the hall.

“Why?” He turned and almost clocked her with the door frame. She caught it with her hands. “Careful. Because this is your room, I didn’t want to invade your privacy.”

Ronan marched over to his bed and tossed her onto the soft, king-sized mattress. He crawled over her. “Strange because all I can think of is invading your privacy.”

“Then do it.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and let the world narrow until there was only them. The beautiful magic between them was deeper than she remembered. His taste, his smell, and how he could make her shiver with a brush of his lips went beyond magical. His ability to send her into the deepest recesses of pure sensuality and still bring her to the heights of desire defied any connection she’d ever experienced before.

Much later, he held her in his arms, and she sighed in complete contentment. “Your sisters are amazing.”

“They have issues, but I won’t trade them in on a new model.”

She laughed and turned toward him. “Gabby and Charley offered me a job managing the charities that Guardian supports. But they offered me way too much money to do it. I’d love to take on the challenge, but please tell them they don’t need to pay me that much money.”

He frowned. “How much did they offer?”

She told him, and he narrowed his eyes at her. “I’d be surprised if they didn’t do a market study and offer you what they felt was fair.”

She dropped her chin to his chest. “That’s what Charley said they did.”

“Then they won’t change the offer.” He rolled her so he was on top of her. “Never underestimate those two. They are cunning and capable women. Just like you are.”

“Awww ... you think I’m cunning.” She laughed when he rolled his eyes.

“I think you’re everything I need in my life.” He lifted away from her. “Don’t move.”

She lifted up onto her elbow and watched him pull on his jeans, commando. He pointed at her. “Don’t move.” He sprinted out of the room.

She looked at the clothes strewn all over his room. By the time she’d decided to get up and pick them up, he was back and jumped onto the bed and straddled her. “Here.” He handed her a ring box.

She blinked and took it. “What is this?”

“Open it,” he urged her.

Fleur eased the top up and gasped. “Ronan!”

He took it from her and lifted the square, cushion-cut ruby from the box. It had to be at least five carats, and two channel-cut diamonds flanked it.

“It isn’t an engagement ring. It’s a promisering.” He slid the ring on her left hand. “I had to google that shit. What a promise ring means and what hand to put it on.” He laid down beside her, and she turned to face him. “I wanted you to have something

that showed you my commitment to you and what we have.” He looked around his room. “This is just a house?—”

She lifted onto her elbow. “No, sir, this is a mansion.”

He shook his head. “It’s building materials—bricks, wood, paint, and nails. Without someone to share it with, it’s shelter and nothing else. That was what my life was before you—just the bare structure. With you in it, my life is so much more. One day, that ring will be replaced with a diamond and a band. When you’re comfortable and know in your heart that you’re ready, you’ll be Mrs. David Alexander.”

She pushed away. “Who the hell is David?”

He laughed. “That is my first name. It’s also my father’s first name. So, I go by my middle name.”

“Oh.” She looked at the weighty ring on her finger and then back to him. “I do love you. But ... there’s so much to still discover about each other. What if ...”

He put his finger over her lips, hushing her. “A bridge too far. We aren’t crossing it, and hopefully, we never will. Your concerns, though, are why this isn’t a diamond. I want it to be, but I also didn’t want to scare or rush you.” He leaned down for a kiss. “When you’re ready.”

She stared into his intense, dark eyes. “How did this become my life? You’re too good to be true.”

He shook his head. “I’m just a man who loves you.” She lifted her lips for another kiss. He loves me. She let that truth soak into her soul. She loved him. She knew that in the fabric of her being, but she’d yet to let herself believe he could feel the same for her, even though he’d said the words. Perhaps it was time to accept love could

happen for her because the truth was this man, Ronan or David, the name didn't matter, but this man was in love with her, and she was in love with him. Love, no matter the origin or the speed it developed, was here between them, and it was real.

EPILOGUE

Deacon watched his extended family acting like idiots. But that was the nature of things. He laughed at Smoke as he approached Charley and grabbed her by the hand, ending the argument that she'd lost over fifteen minutes ago. If she ever won an argument with Con, he'd never heard about it. Yeah, Dan had the patience of a saint.

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His mom appeared by his side. “Ronan’s girl, Fleur, is sweet.”

He nodded. “She’s real, Mom. I saw the conditions she lived in for years. When the operators were gathering evidence, they found each of the emails she sent imploring someone, anyone, to pay attention to the plight of the IDPs. She’s got a heart of gold.”

“Your dad told me.” She lifted her wine glass with two ice cubes floating in her red wine. “Ronan is going to come work at the mountain. Eventually.”

“He has some issues to take care of first. Wolf is trying to come back, but if he can’t, taking on a new member will be on Talon.”

“I heard. I can’t believe he’s old enough to take over a team. I can remember when he was born.”

“He’s a couple of years younger than we were, but he’s ready.”

“Ronan was talking to Dad about working with the teams, like Jacob.” She turned to him. “He wanted to ensure there was enough room for both of you to work with the teams. That was an absurd worry. This is your organization. Your father built it for all four of you. You can manage it any way you want.”

Deacon smiled. “I know, Mom.”

“You don’t have to stay in the field.” She took a sip of her wine. “Just my annual reminder that I’d like you home more.”

“Oh, and who’s going to keep you home?”

He laughed when she lifted her wine glass and said, “Touché.”

He dropped his arm over his mom’s shoulder. “I can’t help feeling like something is out there for me.”

“Like?” She looked up at him.

He stared out at the vast Colorado Rockies and shook his head. “I don’t know, Mom, but somehow, I think my destiny is out there, not here.”

“Then you follow that feeling, but make sure you come home to us when you find whatever is out there for you.”

He smiled and looked down at his mom, who was laughing at Con as he backed up from Gabby's horse as if it would bite him.

He laughed, too, and enjoyed the moment. Yes, his mom had aged. Her hair was mostly gray now, and there were fine lines and wrinkles on her face, but she was still the woman who raised them—the person who ensured they grew up grounded and not spoiled rich kids. She kept the family together when Charley was abducted and made sure his dad didn’t work himself to death. She was a force of nature; someday, if he were lucky, he’d find a woman like her. Someone strong enough to put up with his bullshit and deal with his love of being in the field with his team.

Until then, he’d listen to that small voice that kept him searching for his destiny.