



Legacy's Destiny

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Suspense

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

Born into the elite family of Guardian Security, Deacon Alexander has never turned away from his responsibilities. Now a leader of one of Guardian Security's elite teams, he thrives on danger, discipline, and the constant pressure of protecting the world's most vulnerable. But his latest mission puts him on the edge of his limits—and into the arms of the woman who challenges him at every turn.

Echo Lashay is no stranger to war. She's used to operating under extreme conditions as a prior military operative with a classified mission. But when her mission to infiltrate a war zone becomes more treacherous than expected, Echo finds herself relying on Deacon and his team to get her in—and out—alive. The stakes are high; the enemy is closing in, and their growing connection is as undeniable as it is dangerous.

As they fight side by side, Deacon realizes that Echo is unlike anyone he's ever met—brilliant, brave, and completely irresistible. But their mission isn't over, and enemies are lurking in the shadows, determined to stop them at all costs.

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CHAPTER 1

The humid air of the Kachin Hills in northern Myanmar wrapped around the team like a second skin—thick, hot, and suffocating. The scent of damp earth and decaying leaves seeped into their lungs as they trudged through the underbrush. Morning fog hung low over the jungle floor, curling around twisted roots. The dampness clung to their boots, sucking them into the ground. Each step was a battle, the ground boggy from the rainstorm that had swept through just hours before.

Deacon Alexander swiped at the sweat dripping into his eyes, his gloved hand leaving a streak of dirt across his cheek. Ahead, Ranger, his point man, with a machete strapped to his back—paused, motioning for the team to stop with a raised fist. The jungle, alive with the constant buzz of cicadas, seemed to hold its breath. Somewhere, a gibbon howled, its eerie cry echoing through the trees like a warning.

Deacon glanced at Rip, his explosives specialist, who was scanning the treetops. Deacon looked heavenward, his eyes catching every twitch of the branches above. His jaw tightened. This place wasn't just a jungle; it was a predator, alive and waiting for them to make a mistake. It would give no mercy to anyone who didn't know how to survive.

Ranger lowered his fist, pulled his machete from its sheath, and pushed forward, moving them westward. Deacon caught the distant smell of smoke. A small village or tribal settlement was nearby. They'd seen it on the satellite images. Ranger led them away from the locals, who would sound the alarm at the presence of an armed group.

Deacon glanced at his watch's GPS as they moved forward. The lack of a clear trail

made progress difficult. The sound of distant rolling thunder sent every eye on his team to the almost impenetrable canopy above them. At the bottom of the steep terrain, any rain would make the land impassable.

Ranger glanced back at him, and he nodded. They would push on. Their mission was to destroy a cache of military-grade weapons intended for a terrorist cell that Guardian, in conjunction with other intelligence agencies, had determined was planning an imminent attack in a neighboring country.

Hours later, they kneeled behind cover and looked at the abandoned mine where the cache of weapons was hidden.

Silence hung as heavy as the humidity. Even the cicadas had stopped their song. Several gibbons played on trees near the entrance, unbothered by the scattered crates and empty ammo boxes at the mouth of the mine.

Deacon surveyed the area. "I don't like it."

"Yeah, my gut is telling me this isn't right," Ranger said beside him.

"Bandit, run a thermal."

"On it," Bandit whispered from his location about ten meters away.

Deacon stared at the opening. "Rip, charges on the outside, too. No one's going to use this as a cache again."

"Roger that, Cap," Rip whispered from his location about ten meters away, but once again, their comm devices relayed the words clearly.

"Bandit, anything?"

“Looking now,” Bandit replied.

“Click, anything on satellite?” Deacon asked their computer specialist for an update.

“Negative, but I got to tell you, Cap, that canopy could be hiding a fucking battalion, and I might not see it.” Click’s Southie accent was a constant. He was Cobra Team’s specialist and just as much a part of the team as anyone on the ground with Deacon.

“Yeah, I know.” Deacon glanced over at his second in command. “Ranger, you and Ace will go in first, set perimeter defenses. Rip will put up the charges when you’re set. Bandit and I will have his six. When we’re ready for entry, I’ll signal.”

Ranger nodded.

“Copy,” Ace said from where he was watching their six.

“Cap, I got nothing except a family of monkeys. I can’t read anything in the cave. The rock is blocking the thermal,” Bandit said and secured the handheld imager to his pack.

Deacon heard the rain before it hit him. The sound of the drops through the canopy was loud, which was why the insects had stopped.Fuck.

“I don’t like it, but we have an objective and a timeline.” Deacon put his helmet on and glanced at his men. “On my mark.” He looked at each of his men. “Whatever it takes.”

“As long as it takes,” they answered as one.

He looked at his team one last time before giving the command, “Go.”

Ranger lifted at the same time as Ace, and they advanced into the small opening. The gibbons started whooping as they noticed his people exiting. Damn it. Once Ranger and Ace cleared the area, Rip moved forward. Deacon and Bandit were on his six, setting up the small confines of their perimeter.

Every leaf amplified the sound of the rain as it fell harder, drowning out the rest of the jungle noises. The family of gibbons whooping at them under a thick branch jumped, and every last one of the bastards looked left and then leaped from the branches, swinging into the jungle. Deacon shifted his focus to see what had taken the monkeys' attention off them. Fuck.

"We've got company." Deacon couldn't tell who was coming through the jungle. The downpour obscured the figures, but they were men, and they were coming to the mine. Therefore, they were enemies until identified otherwise. "Take cover, move!" His priority was getting his men to safety.

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A bullet's whap landed on the mountain behind him, and a spray of rock stung his neck and shoulders. He lifted his weapon, laying down suppression fire until Ranger called him back, then backed into the mouth of the mine, still firing even though Ranger was covering him. Water dripped from his uniform, and his boots squelched, expelling the rainwater through the vents at his arch.

"Cap." He turned at Ranger's call. "Look."

Explosive charges lined the inside of the mouth of the mine, set and rigged for an explosion. As he watched, the red light on the detonation device flashed. Fuck. To go back out was certain death. "Inside. Move."

They pounded down the shaft as the explosives ruptured the air with a percussive blast that knocked him off his feet. He covered his head and waited for the debris blast. He wasn't disappointed. Huge pieces of debris pelted him, burying his legs in dirt, rocks, and lumber. When he could, he looked back. Fuck, that was too close. "Sound off." He yelled the words because he couldn't hear his own voice. His ears were ringing too fucking loud to hear shit.

Lights bounced around in the thick dust. Finally, he saw Ranger walking back toward him, then Rip, Ace, and Bandit. "Thank fuck." He dropped his head to the ground. "I could use some help."

Ranger was already lifting big rocks off his legs, and the rest of the team scooped the loose shit away from him.

"Can you feel your legs?"

Deacon looked up at Bandit. His medic was in his face. He waved off his teammate's concern but answered, "Yeah, and this shit is heavy."

Bandit snorted, shaking his head, but got back to unburying his legs. As soon as he could, he elbowed himself out of the debris. Bandit was feeling him up before he could tell him to stop. The medic knew his job, but ... "You should buy me a drink first." Deacon winced as Bandit's hands palpated and checked his legs. He was bruised, but he didn't think anything was broken. Not that Bandit would let him up without making sure.

"Shut up, Cap. I'm doing my job." Bandit rolled him over and narrowed his eyes. "That cut needs attention." Bandit pointed at him. "Not open for fucking argument. God only knows what shit will get into it from this jungle."

"We have to get out to the jungle first," Ace said as he flashed his light to the mountain of rocks and dirt blocking the mouth of the mine. "There are at least ten tons of mountain right there."

"There are always other exits, air shafts, and such," Ranger said before planting his ass on a boulder that, if it had rolled three feet to the left, would have squished him like a stink bug. Bandit cleaned and bandaged a wicked jagged slice on Deacon's shin. He'd laid the skin open pretty damn good, so Bandit used some medical-grade superglue to help seal the wound.

"Let's get you up and see if I missed anything." Bandit offered him his hand, and Deacon grabbed it. He was pulled up, carefully put his weight on his feet, and then moved. The cut hurt, and his muscles were sore. He was banged up, but he'd be able to move.

"I'm good."

Ace snorted. “That isn’t what your last girlfriend said.”

“You’re right. She said I was amazing,” Deacon shot back. He reached up to his ear, ensured his comm device was still there, and asked his operator, “Click, can you hear me?”

“I can. I have a weak signal. If you go much deeper into the mine, I might have a problem.”

Thank God for Guardian’s advanced communications system. Deacon asked, “Do you have a blueprint of this mine called up?”

“You know I do. The main shaft extends down for about five hundred feet. The grade looks pretty steep. At the second junction, you’ll want to go left. That should take you back up to the airshaft. There’s an alternate entrance, probably where your bogies will come after you.”

“And where is that in relationship to the airshaft?” Ranger asked as they started walking deeper into the shaft.

“You’d take a right at the junction, and then it’s a maze to the exit. Do you want the directions?” Click would rattle them off in a heartbeat.

“No,” Ranger said. “Just going to leave the fuckers a little present, aren’t we, Rip?”

“Damn straight,” Rip said. “How much time do we have?”

“Best case scenario, fifteen minutes.”

“Worst case is someone is in the mine already.” Deacon’s reminder silenced his men.

“Ace, take point.” The rest of the team formed up, and they started the trek down the

shaft.

Click continued, “Once you get to the airshaft, you’ll see a bulkhead and a fan. The fan will have to be removed. The way up is a cylinder-constructed shaft four feet in diameter. One hundred and sixteen feet straight up.”

Which was a fucking joy to hear. He limped along with his team. He hurt like a motherfucker, but he was going to suck up that bullshit and push on. Ace’s flashlight swung to the left and stayed there. “Well, well, well ...” Ace chuckled. “Look at that, will ya?”

Deacon made his way to where Ace had stopped. “Shit. Ranger, grab that paperwork. Rip, let’s rig it up.” A massive cove of weapons, crates, and explosives sat off the main shaft. Rip tossed him the detonators, then glanced over at Ranger. “Get that loaded.”

“Working it,” Ranger said as he shoved the paper into his pack.

A small meow came from the corner of the cave, and every last one of them stopped and turned to the noise. A kitten, maybe a couple of months old, stood in the tunnel, covered in dust.

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Deacon walked over to the animal and scooped it up. “It could have rabies,” Bandit warned him.

Deacon rolled his eyes. “Yeah, because it’s foaming at the mouth.”

“What are you going to do with it?” Rip asked as he worked.

“Well, I’m not leaving it down here. Bandit, see if there are any more.” He shoved the kitten into his uniform top and dealt with the needle claws the little fur ball had as it explored the inside of his shirt.

“On it,” Bandit answered as he ghosted ahead in the tunnel.

“Ready for the detonator on this one, Cap.” Deacon limped toward the large deposit of C-4 Rip had meticulously planted in the center of the weapons cache. Each step sent sharp pain stabbing through his injured leg, but he shoved the detonation cap into the cool, clay-like block with determined precision.

Rip worked quickly, slapping two more explosive packs near the jagged entrance of the shallow outlet. The adhesivesquelched faintly as he pressed them against the gritty stone, his fingers steady despite the tension crackling in the air.

“Cap.” Bandit’s whisper cut through the confined space like a razor, and everyone froze. “I hear them.”

A chill ran down Deacon’s spine as he tossed a detonator to Ace, the motion fluid despite the weight of urgency bearing down on them. The faint echoes of boots

scuffing against stone reached his ears, sending adrenaline surging through his veins. Rip, working at a frantic yet practiced pace, set another charge while Ranger zipped up his pack with quick, precise motions.

“This is for our retreat,” Rip murmured, his voice low and firm. “It’s on a timer. Thirty seconds to clear the shaft. Can you make it, Cap?” His eyes flicked up, worry flashing in their depths.

“Watch me,” Deacon growled, squaring his shoulders. The ache in his leg was a distant hum now, drowned out by the pulse-pounding adrenaline of the moment.

“Caaaap ...” Bandit’s warning hiss came again, his weapon rising to his shoulder. The hairs on the back of Deacon’s neck prickled as he registered the urgency in Bandit’s voice. It wasn’t a question. It was a warning: Move. Now.

“Go,” Deacon barked, his voice a whip of authority. The team bolted, feet pounding against the uneven ground, their breaths harsh and fast in the narrow confines of the tunnel. The dim light of Ranger’s flashlight flickered, throwing eerie shadows as they reached the second junction. Rip slammed the charge against the wall, glancing at Deacon just as the first bullet ricocheted off the wall near Bandit, sending sharp shards of rock flying.

“Blow the cache!” Deacon roared, his voice nearly drowned out by the staccato of enemy gunfire. The kitten had stopped moving and was clawing into his back with a death grip, but he barely noticed.

He dropped beside Ace, the chill of the stone biting through his uniform as they laid down suppressive fire.

“Cap, move your ass—you’re the one injured!” Ranger slid beside him, his voice tight but resolute as he added his fire to theirs.

“You’ve got fifteen seconds!” Ace shouted, his voice cutting through the chaos.

“Hold them for five more, then follow us!” Deacon ordered, pulling back and firing again. His injured leg screamed in protest as he pushed himself to his feet and stumbled into motion.

Ranger and Ace stayed behind, firing in practiced rhythm before peeling off, sprinting down the shaft after giving them lead time.

“Rip!” Deacon’s shout was hoarse, the grit in the air already stinging his throat. “Blow it!”

Rip didn’t hesitate, his thumb jamming down on the activator as he ran. A second later, the blast roared through the mine. The earth bucked under their feet, the shockwave slamming into their bodies and sucking the air from their lungs. A deafening rumble followed, and the tunnel filled with a choking cloud of dirt and debris, the sharp scent of scorched rock and pulverized concrete clogging their noses.

“Rally, now!” Deacon yelled over the noise, his voice raw with urgency.

They skidded to a halt, turning to face the tunnel as Ranger and Ace emerged from the choking dust, silhouettes sprinting through the haze. Another wave of the explosion’s aftermath rippled past, stirring loose pebbles that rattled against the walls.

Deacon’s heart thundered as they regrouped, his breathing labored but steady. “Click, can you hear us?”

There was nothing over his comms. He glanced at Ranger. “Anything?” Ranger shook his head. Fuck. Okay, they knew the way out, at least. “Status?”

“Good to go,” Ranger said.

“Yeah. Good,” Ace agreed.

Rip gave him a thumbs up, and Bandit pointed to his leg. “Ripped open that patch job, Cap.”

Deacon looked down. Blood seeped through the mud-encrusted digital jungle print of his uniform. There wasn’t time to worry about his fucking boo-boo. Besides, his back was probably shredded. The kitten poked its head up to the opening of his uniform shirt and meowed plaintively. Deacon patted its head and looked at Bandit. “It’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

Ranger took point, and the array of flashlights illuminated the tunnel in an eerie glow, extending their shadows as they walked out of the lingering dust from the explosion.

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When they reached the fan, there was no discussion. The five men worked in tandem to disassemble and tear out the rusted industrial-sized fan. Ranger kicked through the last screen, and Deacon slipped through the opening. He held his flashlight up. The beam was too weak to illuminate the entire shaft, but he could see a pale light filtering in from the top.

“No telling what’s covering the top,” Ranger said from where he was crouched at the entrance.

Deacon nodded. “I’ll take the cutters with me. Also the rope.” If there was an obstruction to getting out, maybe he could fashion some support to hold himself up there. Ranger stood up. It was tight with the two standing in the four-foot-wide shaft.

Deacon ran his hands over the surface of the vent. “It’s concrete. That’ll give us grip as we go up.”

“I can go up first. Your leg is injured.”

Deacon shook his head, determination etched into his expression. “You’ll go up second, and together, we’ll bring up the rest of the team. I’m the best climber here.” There was no argument. He and Ronan, his twin, had tested their mettle on cliffs and mountains worldwide, scaling rock faces for the sheer thrill of it. They were skilled and calculated. But this wasn’t a hobby climb—this was survival. Free climbing without ropes meant death if he fell, and even with ropes, the stakes were brutally high.

Deacon shrugged off his pack, the damp fabric of his fatigues clinging to his skin.

The humid, stale air in the shaft was heavy, carrying a faint metallic tang mixed with the acrid smell of lingering explosives. He fished out the kitten and handed him to Ranger. “Put him in my pack and send him up.”

“Ah, Cap ... you’re a marshmallow. You saved the kitty.” Ranger chuckled and took the fur ball.

“Should I remind you about the puppy you brought out of that mission last year?”

“Probably not.” Ranger laughed.

Deacon secured the rope around his waist. Looping it across his chest would only get in the way in such tight quarters. The cool metal of the cutting tool and the weight of the Halligan bar in his pockets pressed reassuringly against his thighs. He tugged on his gloves, their texture rough and worn, a familiar barrier between his hands and the unforgiving concrete walls.

Tilting his head back, he squinted up the tube to see dim light filtering through a grid far above, casting faint, ghostly patterns on the damp walls. The space felt oppressive. “All right, duck out so I can brace up.”

Ranger nodded, and he and the kitten disappeared into the mine shaft, his boots crunching faintly on debris. Deacon leaned back, pressing his shoulders into one side of the shaft and bracing his boots against the other. The cold, clammy surface sent a chill through his soaked shirt, but he ignored it, focusing on the outward pressure that locked him into place. The gritty wall bit into his shoulders and boots as he pushed upward in small, deliberate movements.

The faint scrape of concrete against his back was amplified in the shaft, a steady, grating rhythm as he climbed. Sweat gathered, trickling in stinging rivulets down his temples and pooling at the nape of his neck. He blinked furiously as it dripped into

his eyes, the salt burning. The damp walls seemed to sweat with him, a slick sheen of moisture that made his boots slide precariously. His heart jolted each time his foot slipped, but his focus never wavered. He inched higher, his muscles trembling from the effort.

A soft sound below signaled Ranger's return, but Deacon didn't glance down. His world was the tube's curved walls and the faint glow of daylight above. When he finally neared the top, the light was muted, pale against the encroaching darkness outside. The air shifted, cooler and fresher, tinged with the earthy scent of wet foliage. His radio crackled as he grunted upward, each movement deliberate.

"Can you hear me now?" he asked, his voice rough with exertion.

Click's Southie accent came through clearly. "I can. Status?"

"All alive. Climbing out the shaft," Deacon replied, his breath coming in labored bursts. His eyes locked on the grating above, every instinct focused on the task.

"Weapons?"

"Buried in ten tons of rock," he muttered, pressing forward, the pain in his legs burning like fire.

"Bogies?"

"Either buried or heading our way." His tone was grim. He wouldn't discount the latter, not with so much at stake.

When he finally reached the grating, the corroded rebar was a mix of rust and grime. He could smell the decay, a metallic tang mixed with the damp air. Taking out his flashlight, he counted four bolts holding the grate. He cursed under his breath.

“Hang on, Click.” Deacon maneuvered the rope through the grid, his shoulders screaming in protest as he wedged the sling he’d built beneath him. The rough fibers of the rope bit into his back, and he used every ounce of strength to steady himself. He fed the diamond dust wire of the cutting tool through the first bolt. The high-pitched scraping sound as the wire bit into metal set his teeth on edge. Rust flaked away, sharp bits falling into his hair and neck, irritating his skin.

The bolts gave way one by one, faster than he expected, though the process was far from easy. He had to change the wire six times, each movement taxing his aching arms. By the time the last bolt snapped, darkness had fallen outside, blanketing the jungle in shadows. Bracing himself once again, he maneuvered out of the improvised sling. The chill of the metal against his gloves grounded him as he slid the grate aside. It fell onto the jungle floor with a distinct clang, the sound swallowed by the surrounding jungle.

“Damn,” he muttered, his voice thick with exhaustion. Muscles quivering, he hoisted himself up, gripping the rough lip of the ventilation shaft. The cold metal dug into his gloves, but he powered through, hauling his body over the edge. He collapsed onto the damp earth, the scent of rain-soaked vegetation filling his lungs. The cries of monkeys and the rustle of underbrush blended with the distant growls of predators, a noisy song of life that reassured him no humans were nearby.

“I’m out. The area is clear,” he whispered into his comm, his voice barely audible over his pounding heartbeat.

“Copy,” Click responded.

Despite his fatigue, Deacon worked methodically, anchoring the rope to a nearby tree with weary hands. The bark felt rough and cool under his fingers, grounding him. He padded the edge of the shaft with his gloves to prevent fraying, then dropped the rope down.

Ranger was the first to climb after sending up the packs. A kitten popped out of the top of Deacon's pack and went absolutely wild, squeezing through the smallest hole at the top. Then another skittered out. He flipped open the top of the pack, and the mother cat hissed at him, striking with claws that were unlike a domestic cat's. She bolted out of the bag and darted away.

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Deacon chuffed, “You’re welcome.” At least they were out of the mine and had a fighting chance at survival.

He reached out, gripping Ranger’s arm to haul him over the edge. “Three cats?”

“Bandit found the others,” Ranger panted as he pulled out of the shaft. Together, they assisted the rest of the team, every movement precise and efficient. When they were all at the top, his medic refused to be ignored and tended to Deacon’s injured leg. By the time Bandit finished bandaging Deacon’s leg, the night had deepened, wrapping them in darkness.

“I’ve contacted the extraction team. You have five hours,” Click relayed.

Deacon stood, his eyes scanning the darkened jungle. The smell of rain hung heavy in the air, mingling with the earthy aroma of damp soil and the faint musk of unseen animals. Their day wasn’t over yet.

“Let’s move,” he said, his voice low but firm. They slipped into the shadows, one step closer to retrieval and civilization.

CHAPTER 2

“Cap, you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Ranger fastened the button on his long-sleeved shirt as he asked.

“Positive. I’m not in the mood for the clubs tonight. I’ll grab some dinner and then head back here.”

Rip walked out as he spoke. Their suite at the Pacific Crown Hotel in Bangkok had three rooms and five beds. Located on Sukhumvit Road, the hotel was a modern mix of contemporary design with nods to Thai culture. They stayed here whenever they needed to be in Bangkok. Tomorrow, they'd start a new mission in conjunction with the CIA, but they'd learn the details of that assignment later. The team was enjoying the local nightlife and a good meal tonight.

"Stay out of the red-light districts," Deacon said as he poured a beer into a frosted mug.

Bandit groaned. "God, yes, I already told them that. I don't have penicillin with me."

Ace snickered. "We're heading to the clubs. Probably Onyx. I want to remember what people our age do for fun. Don't wait up for us, Cap."

"I have zero intention of waiting up for you." Deacon lifted his beer to his team. "Enjoy."

"We will." Ranger closed the door behind them with a wave goodbye. It was good to see his team unwind. They'd had back-to-back missions, so the two weeks of downtime in Manila and today in Bangkok were needed and appreciated. His guys needed time to blow off steam without him keeping tabs on them, and he didn't worry about them. They were all adults—most of the time.

His phone vibrated, and he smiled, knowing who it was without looking. He pulled out his phone and answered it. "Stuck in some hellhole again and need rescuing?"

His brother Ronan barked out a laugh. "Screw you. You didn't have to show up. We would have managed."

It was Deacon's turn to laugh. "Managed to die in a firefight, maybe."

“Well, you were useful, at least. Jacob says you’re working on a mission with the CIA. Trust but verify.”

“Always.” Deacon took a sip of his beer. “What’s new with you?”

“I’ve decided to give Guardian my resignation.”

Deacon choked on his beer. Coughing, he sputtered, “Say what?” and wiped at his face as soon as his beer hit the counter. Suds slopped from the top of the bottle, but he disregarded the mess.

Ronan snickered. “Don’t have a heart attack. I’m resigning as team leader. I’m not leaving Guardian. I’m moving up to HQ. I gave them a year. By then, Fleur will be well settled in her position, and hopefully, she’ll believe I’m in this for the long run. She knows I love her, but how we got together has her gun shy.”

Deacon rolled his eyes and slumped back. “No pun intended, right?”

“Actually, no, but I’m good like that,” Ronan shot back at him.

“I’m glad you found her.” Deacon sighed. “Someday, I’ll find the woman who can put up with me.”

“You mean being in the field?”

“Yeah. I just can’t see myself sitting behind a desk,” Deacon admitted. “But I’ll admit there’s something missing.” And ever since he saw his brother fall in love with Fleur, he’d been thinking it was what Ronan had found. But he’d never admit that part. Instead, he changed the subject. “How did Charley and Gabby take it?”

“Gabby was all business, congratulated me on growing up, then ducked out for a

meeting. Charley was ... well, Charley. She wanted to draw lines around authority and discuss how she and Gabby ran the company with Jason.”

“And Jason?”

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“He told Charley that no one was usurping her authority, welcomed me to the staff, and then advised me to cut ties now and walk away from the team instead of dragging out the goodbye. I don’t agree. Wolf is still out on medical leave. Honestly, we don’t know if he’ll be cleared to return. That hit to the head was serious. We have an FNG who’s good, but he’s temporary and knows it. I’m not leaving Wraith a man down or with an untested element while needing to fill another spot. We’ll get the new guy up to speed and then start looking for someone to replace me. Wraith is ready now to lead the team, and for the next year, I’ll let him do that while being there if he needs me.”

“He won’t. That man grew up hard and fast. I can’t imagine what he and Ranger went through. Both of them have ghosts from the Siege.” Ranger and Wraith’s moms had been kidnapped during a maniac’s coordinated attempt to destroy Guardian headquarters and the training annex in South Dakota. It was more of a war than a siege, but Guardian had prevailed and pulled themselves out of the ashes.

“We have experience with growing up hard and fast. Charley and Gabby, too.” Ronan’s voice became soft. “Everyone has ghosts of the past floating in their closets.”

“Truth.” Deacon nodded even though his brother couldn’t see him. “Have you ever regretted the training we went through to become team members and leaders?” It had been grueling. Special Forces training, marksmanship, leadership, weapons, tactics, and hand-to-hand combat were all condensed for them. Their father had ensured they received the best training available from the top experts in each field, both privately and through Guardian. As tough as it had been, it had turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to him. He’d found his place in the world.

“No, not at all. If I hadn’t done it, I wouldn’t have met Fleur. But I know you love the field more than I do.”

“Congratulations on growing up. Forgive me if I don’t follow in your footsteps anytime soon.”

Ronan chuckled. “We’ve always blazed separate trails, haven’t we? Which is another reason I called. I got a bad feeling in my gut, and I’m not up for a mission. We’re back in the States for a month. That means ...”

“Yeah, I know. I feel it, too. Something’s coming.”

“And you start a mission tomorrow,” Ronan said. “Don’t discount it, D. Keep your guard up. When we both get this feeling, shit gets spicy, real fast.”

“Don’t I know it?” There’d been too many times they’d both gotten the feeling, and then all hell had busted loose. They didn’t discount the twinning thing. It was real, at least as far as they were concerned.

“If you need me, one text or a call from Click, and we’re heading your way.”

“Appreciate it. You know I’ll send word if I need it. Dead isn’t a good look on anyone.”

“Too right. Take care of yourself, D.”

“Promise. You take care of yourself, and tell Fleur I said hello.”

“Will do. Love you, man.”

“Love you, too.” Deacon hung up, drained the last of his beer, and headed out into the

humid Bangkok night. The chaotic rhythm of Sukhumvit Road buzzed in the distance. Tucked away in a narrow alley, the Golden Orchid Hotel stood as a serene escape from the city's relentless energy. Its lantern-lit entrance glowed softly, and he could already taste the rich, spicy flavors of Jade Lotus, the hotel's restaurant. The green curry, som tum, and pad Thai had been calling to him ever since his last visit.

The restaurant was hushed this late, a stark contrast to the clamor of the tourist-filled streets. The dim lighting reflected off deep green walls adorned with black-and-white photographs of old Bangkok—images of bustling canals, wooden markets, and gilded temples. Deacon let his fingers graze the edge of a frame, tracing the evolution of a city he barely recognized. His thoughts drifted to the changes he'd seen in himself over the years. After finishing his meal, he lingered over his beer, enjoying the quiet.

The faint clink of glass drew his attention. He turned, and that was when he saw her.

At first, she was just movement—a figure slipping through the doorway—but then the details clicked into focus. A woman stood at the bar, her posture casual yet striking. Her hair, dark red with hints of copper, shimmered in the lantern light. She wore jeans and a simple white shirt, the fabric clinging in just the right places to highlight a toned, athletic frame. She wasn't trying to turn heads, but she did—his, for certain.

Deacon found himself leaning forward, caught in the subtle grace of her movements. Her skin glowed naturally, untouched by makeup, and her confident stance told a story he wanted to read. She exchanged quiet words with the bartender, her brow furrowing slightly when he gestured to the drink menu. A quiet laugh bubbled in Deacon's chest as he realized what was happening: a language barrier.

He stood, his body moving before his mind had fully caught up, and crossed the room. As he approached, he noticed the delicate curve of her neck, the way her fingers drummed lightly on the bar, a small tell of impatience. Her eyes lifted as he

neared, and when their gazes met, it hit him like a punch to the chest. Her eyes were a deep, velvety brown, framed by lashes that gleamed auburn under the light. For a moment, he forgot how to breathe.

“Do you know what you ordered?” he asked, his voice low and warm.

She turned to him fully, and a smile spread across her face, slow and dazzling. “Actually, no, I don’t,” she admitted, her voice rich with humor and a hint of self-deprecation. The sound of it settled over him like a balm, soothing yet electric.

“Do you like gin?” he asked, nodding toward the cocktail shaker.

“Honestly?” Her lips quirked. “I can’t remember having gin before. I usually stick to wine. Chardonnay is my favorite, but tomorrow will be a hell of a day, so I thought I’d mix things up.”

Deacon chuckled, leaning a little closer, catching a faint trace of her scent—something clean and citrusy. “Would you like me to intervene?”

Her gaze flicked to him, dipping briefly to his chest, then back up, an assessment that left a small, teasing smile on her lips. “Do you speak Thai?”

“I do,” he said, his grin widening.

“Then, by all means,” she said, gesturing grandly to the bartender.

But the drink had already arrived—a violet concoction garnished with a fruit skewer. She sniffed it tentatively before taking a sip. Her eyes widened. “Oh.” She blinked, then took another sip. “Oh, this is nice. Fruity but not too sweet.”

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Deacon smirked. “And made with two very generous shots of gin.”

She shrugged, taking another sip. “I can’t taste it, and since I’m staying here at the hotel, the drive home isn’t exactly a concern.”

His chest warmed at her easy humor. “Care to share a booth?” He gestured to the cozy seats along the wall.

Her gaze held his for a beat longer than necessary, a flicker of challenge dancing in her expression. Then, she extended her hand. “I don’t share booths with strangers. My name’s Echo.”

He blinked, momentarily caught off guard by the unique name, then took her hand in his, his grip firm but careful. “Deacon.” Her grip lingered, her fingers warm against his. “You have an unusual name,” he teased, still holding her gaze.

“Parents are sixties throwbacks,” she said with a laugh, her eyes sparkling. “What’s your excuse?”

He chuckled, the sound low and intimate. “Boomer parents, military roots, and I’m named after a family friend. I’m here for business.” He motioned to the booth again, and that time, she nodded.

They slid into the booth across from each other, the quiet hum of the restaurant wrapping around them like a cocoon. For the first time in what felt like ages, Deacon felt the walls he kept so carefully constructed around himself ease just a little.

Echo tilted her head, her lips curving into a smirk that hinted at curiosity. “What kind of business do you do, Deacon?”

He hesitated for half a beat, measuring his words. “I work with a company that troubleshoots problems for other organizations. I’m kind of a fixer. They send my team and me in when they want things resolved quickly.” His voice was steady, but he was aware of the flicker of her gaze, sharp and assessing. “And you?” he asked, the lantern light casting shadows across the polished wood table.

Her fingers lightly circling the base of her drink. “The easiest way to explain it is to say I work in IT. I’m here to clean up a mess someone else caused with one of the systems I designed way back in the day.” She shrugged, but there was a hint of weariness in the gesture, a shadow of frustration that piqued his curiosity. “I’m not out in the field often anymore.”

“By choice?” He leaned back against the cushion, one arm draped along the edge of the booth. The casual pose belied his sharp attention to every detail—how her hair slipped over her shoulder when she moved, the quick flicker of her lashes as she considered her answer.

“Well, yes and no.” Her fingers toyed with the rim of her glass before she pushed her hair back, revealing the elegant line of her neck. The silky strands fell in a cascade down her back, catching the golden light. “After a long stint working in my field, they promoted me to a nice office with a view. I’m not going to lie—I don’t hate it. But I’m both excited and pissed that I’m here.”

“In Bangkok or the field?” he asked, his lips quirking.

Her dark eyes sparkled with amusement as she took a slow sip of her drink. Then, she winked. “Yes.”

Deacon chuckled, the tension in his shoulders easing further. “Ever been to Thailand before?”

“Nope. I was told most people speak at least a little English.” She glanced toward the bartender, her lips twitching into a grin. “He’s the first who hasn’t.”

“And yet you ended up with a drink you like,” he pointed out, nodding toward her half-empty cocktail.

She laughed, the sound soft and genuine. “I did. Now, I just have to figure out what it is so I can ask for it back in the States.” She took another sip of the purple concoction.

“Have you eaten?” he asked, his brow arching slightly.

“What?” She blinked as though surprised by the question. “Oh, yeah, on the plane.”

“Not good enough.” His tone was firm but playful. “I saw how much alcohol he poured into that drink.” He raised a hand, and the waitress appeared almost instantly. Deacon ordered three appetizers without hesitation, his confident manner drawing Echo’s curious gaze.

When the waitress left, she leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. “How did you learn Thai?”

“It wasn’t as difficult as you’d think after I mastered Mandarin.” He couldn’t help the grin that spread as her jaw dropped slightly.

“Two languages?” she asked, incredulous.

He shook his head.

Her eyes widened. “Three?”

“Five,” he admitted, a touch of pride in his tone. “French, English, Mandarin, Thai, and Japanese.” He wasn’t going to tell her he was working on Vietnamese.

“Holy hell,” she said, leaning back in her seat, her eyes narrowing as she studied him. “I can’t even say I mastered English. Most of the time, I butcher it.”

He laughed, the rich sound filling the space between them. When the laughter settled, she asked, “What exactly do you troubleshoot?”

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His shrug was almost imperceptible. “Proprietary information,” he said smoothly. “I’m afraid I can’t get into specifics.”

“Oh, I get that.” She nodded, her expression shifting, softening her features. “So, where were you born?”

“Colorado,” he said, watching her reaction. “You?”

“Montana. Bozeman. Where in Colorado?”

“We claim Denver because my father has a spread in the Rockies. North of the city, way up in the mountains.” His tonesoftened as he spoke, memories of home flashing briefly in his mind. “Mom home-schooled us until we graduated high school. Then I went to college with my twin brother.”

Her brows rose. “A twin, huh? Another man like you?”

“Ronan is definitely a man.” He chuckled. “The guy is as macho as you can get.”

She lifted both eyebrows and shook her head. “More than you? I find that hard to believe. Where did you go to college? In Colorado?”

He nodded, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Yep. You?”

“Bozeman High School,” she said, nostalgia creeping into her voice. “Then MIT after that.”

His whistle was low, appreciative. “MIT? Smarter than the average bear, huh?”

“Well, I don’t know about that, Yogi,” she shot back with a chuckle, her wit quick and effortless. “I graduated and accepted a commission in the Army because ROTC paid for most of my tuition and such. I played that game for eight years before I got out.”

“And now, you’re in IT for one of those Beltway companies,” he said, piecing together her story.

“Good guess.” She grinned, leaning back. “Virginia. They love scooping up former military, don’t they?”

“They do,” he said, nodding. “I served in the Air Force. Left after my commitment was up and never looked back. It was a great start ...”

Her eyes rolled, playful exasperation evident. “I know. The military had way too many limitations for me.”

“They’re called regulations,” he teased, his grin widening when she made a face at him. So, she was a rule-breaker. Interesting.

“Yeah, those things. Hated them.” She laughed again, and it warmed the space between them.

When the food arrived, fragrant steam curled up from the plates, filling the air with an enticing medley of spices. Deacon ordered another round of drinks, and Echo eyed him with mock exasperation though her lips twitched in amusement.

When she took her first bite, her eyes fluttered closed, and she let out a low, almost indecent moan. “My goodness, this is amazing.”

Deacon couldn't help but chuckle at her reaction. "You should try the curry here. It's the best in the city—that's why I came tonight."

Her eyes popped open wide with surprise. "Wait. You're not staying here? You actually came here just for the food?"

He grinned, leaning back in his seat. "I did. My team went to the clubs, but I prefer the quiet and good food." His voice softened. "I love what I do, and the people I work with are like family, but sometimes, I need a bit of distance."

She paused her chopsticks poised mid-air and regarded him thoughtfully before placing a dumpling in her mouth. After a moment, she set the sticks down and dabbed at her lips with her napkin. "I think I'm the opposite. I spend so much time alone that when I get a chance to do something social, I jump in with both feet."

"Time alone?" The woman across from him was vivacious and witty. Why in the hell did she spend so much time alone?

Echo nodded. "Perks of the job. I work on things I can't discuss, and my job puts me in really boring company." She dropped her head back and looked at the ceiling before righting herself. "And really old company. Man, I can clearly see myself in thirty years because they were like me once, but they're still doing the same thing, albeit in bigger and better offices." She shook her head. "So, yeah, both feet. Big splash." She lifted her purple cocktail, the rim glistening under the low lantern light, and tilted her head. Her voice dipped to a husky murmur, sending a shiver down his spine. "Do you want your distance after I finish?"

Deacon met her gaze, his smile slow and deliberate. "Distance isn't what I was thinking about." He took a measured sip of his beer, letting his words hang between them.

Her smile grew, lighting up her face as her foot brushed against his leg. The movement was subtle but unmistakable. His eyes seemed to widen at her own boldness, and she laughed softly, taking another sip of her drink. “That’s good,” she said, her tone turning playful. “I wasn’t thinking about distance either.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, his gaze locking with hers. “Oh?” His voice dropped an octave, low and inviting. “What were you thinking?”

She picked up her chopsticks and pointed them at him like a playful weapon. “Kissing you.”

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Her words hit him like a jolt, his heart skipping a beat. He covered his reaction by taking another sip of his beer, his grin deepening. “That idea has crossed my mind several times.” Her tongue flicked over her bottom lip, and his eyes followed the motion, mesmerized. She smiled knowingly, leaning forward just enough to close some of the space between them. “You’re a tease,” he accused, his voice tinged with amusement.

She popped a dumpling into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed before wagging her chopsticks at him. “Wrong. Teases tempt but never deliver. Tonight, I will deliver.”

His smile turned predatory, his gaze dropping briefly to her lips before returning to her eyes. “And you plan on delivering on that specific promise?”

She leaned back, her expression calm, though her eyes sparkled with mischief. “That one and many, many more. If you’re willing.”

Deacon exhaled a soft laugh and shook his head. “I don’t know,” he teased. “You might bring me upstairs and take advantage of me.”

Echo threw her head back, laughing, and the sound was like a spark, igniting something deep in his chest. She drained the last of her drink, setting the empty glass down with a soft clink. “I prefer willing partners. I’m not into tying men to bed frames—or being tied myself, for that matter.”

“I think we’re on the same page,” he said, his tone more serious now. There was a spark of honesty in his gaze as he added, “For me, it’s all about the connection. I’m not the kind of guy who can ...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “Let’s just say I

don't usually do one-night stands for the sake of it."

Her expression softened, and she reached across the table, brushing her fingers over his briefly. "Good. Because I'm not looking for that either—not without a spark. And you," she said, her voice dropping lower, "are all spark."

He chuckled, the tension between them sizzling like electricity in the air.

"You haven't said you're willing," she added, leaning back and watching him closely. "And I won't take advantage of a stranger—even a sexy-as-sin stranger. Consent is mandatory."

"Consent is given," he replied. "Freely and happily."

Her smile was brilliant, and she raised her glass in a mock toast before setting it down. "Good. Then I'm going to finish this fabulous food, have one more of these purple monsters, and then take you up to my room for some mind-blowing sex."

Well, damn. Heat flared in his chest, settling low in his belly. He raised a hand to the waitress and ordered another round of drinks, his movements calm despite the riot of anticipation coursing through him. "You won't get an argument from me."

Echo chuckled, her gaze lingering on him as she twirled the stem of her empty glass between her fingers. "Good. Convincing someone to have sex is such a mood killer."

"Right?" He laughed, leaning forward again. "Can you imagine? 'Excuse me, ma'am, you should have sex with me because I'm damn good in bed.'"

She snorted, nearly choking on a laugh as she grabbed a napkin. The sight warmed his chest, her unrestrained laughter more intoxicating than any drink. She coughed, then cleared her throat and reached for his beer before taking a casual sip and sliding

it back to him. It was a simple gesture, intimate in its ease.

Finally, she leaned back, her smile wicked. “No presentations required, then? No detailed reports on your favorite positions?”

The waitress brought the drinks, and he paid for them and the meal. He tilted his head, pretending to consider her last comment. “No, no presentations, at least not to date, but maybe you could draft one for me.”

She stood, her new drink in hand, and threw him a look over her shoulder, her eyes gleaming with challenge. “There’s no time like the present. Unless you’re not ready?”

“Oh, I’m ready.” Deacon rose, his body moving in sync with hers. Her eyes flicked down, taking in the clear evidence of his readiness, and she smirked.

Her laughter was soft and teasing as she turned toward the elevator, her hips swaying with every step. Deacon followed, his eyes locked on her, a sense of wonder mingling with anticipation. How the hell did I get so damn lucky?

CHAPTER 3

Echo slipped the keycard from her jeans and sipped her drink as they waited for the elevator. He wasn’t handsy, and for that, she was appreciative. Public displays of affection were not her groove. She wanted sex with the big man in the worst way, but if he’d been an ogre about it, she would’ve gone to her room by herself. She hadn’t had sex in ages—and good sex? Well, hell, she wasn’t sure if her memory went back that far. That was back when she was in the military. In other words, ancient history. The man following her to her hotel room could break that pattern, or at least she hoped he would.

She turned to him as the elevator door opened. “Just so you know, this is the first

time I've ever invited a guy to my room."

"Could be a dangerous proposition," Deacon said from beside her. She glanced up at him, and he winked. "Although not with me."

"Of course not. I'm sure you're an angel. Don't worry, if the devil comes out, I can take care of myself." She'd risen to a Mongkol Seven in Muay Thai and was considered an Assistant Senior Grand Master. She hadn't met anyone, man or woman, she couldn't best, and that wasn't bragging. That was pure, unadulterated confidence born from over twenty years of practicing the art.

"Is that so?" He held out his hand, asking for the key, when she stopped at her room door.

She turned to him and crossed her arms, smiling. "It is so." He stared at her, raising a single eyebrow. He accepted the card but leaned against the doorjamb. A smile spread. "You know, I have an innate ability to read people. You aren't bluffing. What discipline?"

She liked the man. He had a wicked sense of humor, and damn, if he wasn't sex on a stick. Why couldn't she meet someone like him in the States? Why in the hell did she have to travel halfway around the world to find him for a one-night stand? Her luck sucked sometimes.

"Muay Thai. That was one reason I was excited to come on this trip. Until I was told as soon as I landed that from here, I'd be leaving immediately after my meeting tomorrow morning. So, no visits to the origins of the discipline for me. At least this time." She walked into the room and put her drink down, and as soon as he shut the door, she walked up to him. "Promise number one."

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Echo smoothed her hands over the man's chest, and the feel didn't disappoint. He was hard, not even a hint of softness under her hands. Sliding one hand up to his neck, she lifted to her toes and pulled him down for a kiss. The heady combination of man, aftershave, and soap surrounded him, and she breathed it in as he slowly lowered for a kiss. He dipped once, lightly ghosting over her lips, and her body shivered at the almost-there contact.

"Who's the tease now?" she whispered against his lips.

His chuckle vibrated her body, but he lowered his lips. The sweep of his tongue requesting entry was the ignition point to a heat that filled her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on. His hands gripped her butt, and he lifted her. Breaking the kiss, she laughed as he lifted her and walked to the bed.

She landed in the middle of the bed with a bounce. She lifted to her elbows and watched him take off his shirt. Oh, Lord, she wasn't mistaken. The man was cut and absolutely fucking gorgeous. He neatly placed the shirt on the chair beside the bed. He pulled off his boots, and socks and then went for that belt. All the while he stared at her. He flicked open the buckle and then unzipped his slacks. "Last chance." He gave her the option of stopping.

"As long as you have condoms, we're not stopping."

He smiled and pulled out his wallet. Opening it, he pulled out a strip of four and tossed them on the side of the bed. "I come prepared."

"Obviously." She laughed. "Keep going. I'm enjoying my show."

He stepped out of his slacks, leaving on only his snug boxer briefs. She licked her lips. Damn, he would be one hell of a ride. His Adonis belt framed the thin strip of dark hair that ran down and disappeared under the waistband of those briefs. He had several scars, one that looked like a bullet hole, but she dismissed that thought. Who would want to shoot a corporate man? But ... wow, was he built.

She couldn't wait any longer and moved to the bottom of the bed. "Let me help you with that." She pulled the waistband down and watched as his full and hard cock slapped his stomach when it finally escaped the confines of the fabric. "Damn." She sat on her heels and looked up at him. "I won the lottery."

He laughed and bent down to kiss her. "Your turn."

She lifted the shirt over her head. She was wearing a lace front closure bra she freed herself from immediately. She worked hard in training and knew her body was toned, which was why she wasn't embarrassed to be naked in front of him. She ungracefully dropped back onto the bed and laughed as she lifted her feet to him. "Help."

He pulled off her shoes and took off her socks, tickling her feet in the process. The first time was probably an accident; the second wasn't. She shrieked and then laughed, probably a bit too loud, but she was enjoying herself, so screw it if someone in the adjoining rooms had a problem with it.

He grabbed the bottoms of her jeans and tugged. She hurriedly unfastened them, and they were gone in one pull. He crawled up the bed, over her, and then dropped down on top of her. She made room for him between her legs, and he stared at her. "You're gorgeous."

"Right back atcha, Sparky." He groaned at the nickname and dropped his head to her neck before attacking her ribs with the tickle fingers of doom. She squealed and begged him to stop. She was completely out of breath when he did, but she panted.

“So, not a fan of Sparky, huh?” He immediately started tickling her again. “Okay, Uncle! Uncle! I give. No more Sparkies!”

With a laugh, he rolled her on top of him. “I believe you made some comment about promises.” His hands traveled up her back and through her hair, resting on the back of her head. Pulling her down, he kissed her. She lost herself in the warm sensation of his body under her. His cock straining between them. As she rolled her hips, he deepened the kiss.

He rolled her again and reached for the condoms. Lifting to his knees, he opened the package. She took the condom from him and rolled it on. His head dropped back, and the sound he made was intoxicating. She fell back to the mattress, and he was over her in a second. “Next time, I’ll go slow. It’s been too long for me.”

“God, me, too. No more foreplay.” She was so on board with sex—as in immediately. Wrapping her legs around his hard body, she sighed as he entered her.

“Fuck, so wet for me.”

“Yeah, sexy as hell does it for me, Sparky.” He stopped his in-and-out motion, and she laughed. “Sorry.”

He shook his head. “I’m going to have to teach you a lesson, aren’t I?” He pushed inside her, and she arched her back, reveling in the feel of being so full.

“Oh, yeah. Teach this to me all night long.” She gripped his shoulders as he pulled out and then slid back inside her. “Please,” she whispered before he dropped a bit, looking for her lips.

The heat at her core was white hot, and she ached. The sensation grew as he moved deep inside her and kissed her. He kept her breathless. The friction swirled through

her and swamped her. She met each thrust and pushed her nails into his back, asking for more, and God did he deliver. He broke the kiss and lifted one of her legs, bending it and pinning it against her shoulder. The change in position shattered the ache that had been growing, and with each hard thrust, she tightened. The need to explode teetered right there in the place she hadn't quite reached. She grabbed his shoulders and demanded, "More."

His smug smile surprised her. "Lesson learned?"

Bastard. She couldn't help the huff of laughter in defeat. "God, yes." She would never call him Sparky again. He drove into her relentlessly, pushing her further and further until she snapped. Her gasp and then moan were probably heard three floors down, but she didn't care. Deacon came shortly after her and collapsed on top of her before pulling out. He got up and disposed of the condom, went to the bathroom, and washed before coming back to bed with a warm washcloth for her, which was something no one had ever done for her before. He slid in, and she tucked up next to him. As they laid there, he played with her hair as they floated back to normal breathing. Finally, she poked him.

"You're a dick," she said, causing him to laugh.

"In a good way?" he asked.

She lifted on her elbow but had to reposition because she landed on her hair and yanked her head down. "Ouch." She lifted again and pulled all her hair behind her before turning back to him. "Tell me, in all your wandering in the world, have you ever heard of someone being a dick in a good way?"

He sighed and scratched his chest. "Well, I've heard of fucking someone good."

"Well, you did do that," she agreed. "But that bit at the end there. Uncool."

“Oh, you mean edging you?” He chuckled. “I wouldn’t have lasted much longer. You’re exceptionally hot, and I haven’t had sex this good in quite a while.”

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She rolled her eyes. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

He shook his head. “I don’t lie.”

She frowned. “Ever? Like you’re George Washington?”

He blinked and then laughed, grabbing her hair and moving her toward him. Before kissing her, he said, “Lies complicate everything.” He kissed her, and she almost lost her train of thought. Damn, what he could do to her mind was breathtaking.

She shook her head. The fog of wanting more had started moving in. “Haven’t you ever told a white lie to protect someone’s feelings?”

He shook his head. “Not that I can recall. If I have nothing nice to say, I don’t say anything.”

She slid on top of him and inched back against his cock. “So, if I asked if I tripped your wire sexually, you’d say?”

“Every fucking wire I have and some I didn’t know I had.” He cupped her breasts in his hands as she slowly and gently made figure eights with her hips. His thumbs worked the nipples until they pebbled. She dropped her head back, and a soft moan fell from her open mouth. His cock thickened under her.

“And if we ever meet again, will you act like you don’t know me?”

He shook his head. “Has someone done that to you?”

She scrunched her nose at him. “I’m being hypothetical.”

“A very specific question for being hypothetical.” He rolled her nipples between his fingers, and she gasped. Rivers of electricity connected directly to her core and zapped her with amazing strength.

“Ah ... answer the question.”

“No, I’d never act like I didn’t know you. I would, however, read the room and be respectful.”

She smiled at him, then leaned forward, her hands on his shoulders. “Time for another promise. You ready?”

He lifted his hips. “You tell me.”

She felt his length and leaned over, grabbing the strip of condoms. She pulled one off and opened it. When he made the move to help, she shook her head. “No. I’ve got this.” She rolled the condom down his length and then moved over him. For some reason, she wanted this night to be the best sex he’d ever had. Ever. The why wasn’t important. She was going to pull out all the stops. She slid down his cock and used her quad muscles to gyrate on his cock, watching as his chest started to heave. The feel of his legs shaking under her gave her a major rush and a feeling of control that made her fly. That was until his fingers found her clit. The first swipe over the sensitive nub zapped a megawatt of lightning straight to her core. When he started to rub it with his thumb, her rhythm went straight to hell. Her best-laid plans crumbled as she jerked, and her body splintered. Her core clenched in that reverberating cascade of contractions. The air in the room disappeared, and red and white explosions shattered behind her eyelids. She dropped to Deacon’s chest, and he wrapped his arms around her. Lifting his legs, he thrust into her from his position under her. The change of position triggered more of those gripping ripples of pure

physical perfection. She felt him hilt inside her, and as she clenched, he came. It was the best sex she'd ever had.

She slid off him into a boneless puddle of goo and panted, "Why can't you live in Virginia?"

"Right?" He huffed and continued to breathe deeply. "Fuck, you're addictive."

She lifted her head. "Right back at you, Sparky."

He laughed. "I'll make you pay for that."

"No doubt." She pulled the sheet over them. "Do you ever go back to the States?"

"Every couple of months or so."

"I'll give you my number. I wouldn't mind meeting up again."

He kissed the top of her head. "That sounds like a plan."

She closed her eyes and yawned. "Power nap?"

"Perfect," he said and turned, pulling her closer. The smell of this man and their sex hung heavy in the air, but it was perfection. Who knew she'd have to fly halfway around the world to find someone she'd want to spend more time with? She'd give him her number. Drawing a deep breath, she let it out slowly. He wouldn't call, but that was the way of things. The flight, the sex, and the purple monster drinks settled on her, and she closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 4

Deacon woke instantly. He could see the first light of the morning sun peeking through the drapes. They'd used all his condoms before finally falling back to sleep after their quick power nap. Fuck, the woman was astonishing. Her ability to keep up with him was a first. She was powerful, fit, and funny as hell. Sparky. He smiled and looked at her on the other side of the bed. Her hair covered her face, but her steady breathing told him she was sleeping soundly. He got up and found the small pad on one of the nightstands. He gave her his cell number with a note underneath.

Call me. This is too good to ignore.

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After signing his first initial, he got dressed, and though he wasn't particularly silent, she still slept soundly. He glanced at his watch and then at the door. He needed to get back and get ready for the day. After leaving her keycard by the pad where he'd written the note, he gave the beautiful woman on the bed one last look. He was almost certain he'd never hear from her again, and that would be a shame.

He let himself out and stopped at the desk, putting in a wake-up call for her for eight. Most meetings started at nine, so hopefully, she wouldn't be late for whatever meeting had brought her to Thailand. The walk back to his hotel was cool and quick. The city was just waking up, and the still-flowing traffic had yet to turn into a major artery of metal, motors, bikes, and motorcycles.

The hotel lobby was empty except for a janitor and the tired-looking clerk behind the desk. Deacon swiped his keycard to access the floor where he and his team stayed in the suites, then pressed his card against the card reader and silently opened the door.

Sleeping on the couch, Ranger moved in a fluid arch, his arm leveled at ground level and his forty-five pointed directly at the door and him.

"Don't shoot me, Ranger. It would kill my good mood."

Ranger grunted and returned to his slumber, the gun disappearing under the man's pillow. Ranger must have drawn the short straw. Usually, one of them camped out in the living area. It was a habit born from caution.

Deacon walked into his room and straight into the shower. The hot water relieved his sore muscles. He smiled at the memory of one of the best nights of his life. Echo.

What a name and what a lady. He showered and dried off before calling room service and ordering enough food to feed an army, or his team, in his case. He dressed casually—jeans and a T-shirt—and then moved quietly through the living room to the small kitchenette area to start a pot of coffee. Glancing at his watch when he heard Ranger stirring, he poured a second cup, handing it to the big guy as he shuffled into the kitchen.

Deacon chuckled at the man. Ranger didn't wake up in a good mood. He never had. His hair was sticking up in five or six different directions, and his eyes were slits, but he found the coffee cup Deacon held out to him and took a swig. After a couple of minutes, Ranger found his voice and asked, "Where the hell were you all night, or should I not ask?"

Deacon smiled and lifted his eyebrow. "Don't ask."

"Damn." Ranger rubbed his face. "Ace and Bandit found some sweeties. They aren't back yet. Rip and I came home at about two. I got the short straw."

"Figured when I was met with a faceful of forty-five." Deacon put down his cup when there was a knock at the door. "I ordered room service."

He opened the door and put his hand on his hip. "Where's your key?" Bandit looked like someone had rolled him through an alley.

"In my wallet."

Deacon moved aside as Bandit walked in. "And that is?"

"With the woman who stole it." He shrugged. "Nothing in it but a few bucks, but she didn't know that."

“Was it worth it?” Ranger asked from the kitchen door.

Bandit yawned. “Probably not, but it was amazing.” He dragged past Deacon. “Need a shower.”

“Yeah, you do,” Deacon said, getting a middle finger salute for his effort. He chuckled and refilled his coffee. “If Ace isn’t back by eight, have Click locate him.”

Ranger yawned and nodded at the same time. “What time is the briefing?”

“Eight.” Deacon poured another cup of coffee. “Click said it was with the CIA supervisory officer for the Pacific area.”

Ranger blinked and then rubbed his eyes. “Supervisory officer for the entire region? Must be something big.”

Deacon shrugged and answered the knock at the door. This time, it was breakfast. He motioned for the trolley to be put into the kitchen area, tipped the guy, and waited while Ranger pulled out the small handheld device that told them whether a bug was hidden on the cart.

“Clear,” Ranger said as he took a plastic lid off a plate. “Fuck, thanks, Cap.” He took the plate and a roll of silverware over to the table.

“Anytime.” Deacon laughed and pulled off another plastic lid. Two eggs, over easy, two sausage links, two bacon strips, fried potatoes, and toast, same as Ranger’s plate. There were pastries and fruit somewhere on the cart, but this was what he wanted. Fuel.

He tucked into his meal, and Ranger asked, “Was she a local?”

Deacon shook his head. “American. From Virginia. She’s here for a meeting. Does something with IT.”

“Must’ve been special. You don’t usually do one-night stands.” It wasn’t an accusation, and it was the truth.

“She was beautiful, fit, and had a great laugh.” He shrugged. “I could like her.”

Ranger’s eyebrows hit his hairline. He paused with a speared sausage halfway to his mouth. “Really?”

Deacon nodded. She was one in a million. Sexy, fun, and smart. Just his luck he’d be gone by afternoon. Which sucked. If he had another day, he’d still be with her. But wishes weren’t his realm of responsibility; missions were. “I’d bet a thousand bucks I’ll never see her again, though. You know this job.”

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“Probably. Not taking that bet.” Ranger dipped his chin and popped the sausage into his mouth before asking, “You got her number?”

It took Deacon a moment to decipher what the man had said, but it finally registered, and he answered, “Nah, but I left mine for her.” He piled some eggs on his toast and took a bite. “Figured the ball was in her court.” Even though they’d both been raised with proper manners, living so long with the same men and being in the field, manners, when other people weren’t around, slid to the side and stayed there.

The door opened, and Ace walked in. He glanced at them, lifted his hand, and went straight to his bedroom. Ranger shoveled more food in his mouth before mumbling, “All the chicks are in the coop, Mother Hen.”

“Thanks for the headline.” Deacon rolled his eyes and moved his chair closer to the wall when Bandit entered the small kitchen area. The table could hold three men. If anyone else showed up before one of them was done, they’d have to eat standing up or in the suite's living area.

After Deacon finished his meal, Ranger got a second plate, which Deacon had accounted for. Ace, fresh from the shower, came in with a towel over his shoulders. He pulled off a plastic cover from the stack of plates and sat down when Deacon stood up and put his plate back on the trolley. “What time is the meeting?” Ace asked.

“Eight.”

“We’ll be ready,” Ranger said, and the other two nodded.

Deacon refilled his coffee and leaned against the small counter. “I have no idea what the mission is or where we’ll be heading. The only thing I know is it involves the CIA.”

“Well, that sucks.” Ace snorted.

“The CIA?” Bandit asked.

“No, not knowing anything else,” Ace replied. “I’ve worked with good and bad officers. Like anywhere else, people are who they are. All the security checks in the world won’t change human nature.”

Ranger stopped eating and looked at Ace. “Well, hell, that was deep. Who are you, and what have you done with Ace?”

Ace spoke through his food. “Fuck you, man. I’m deep.”

Bandit laughed. “Yep. Bullshit piles up.”

They laughed, and Ace held up a double-finger salute at all of them.

“Careful, that degree in philosophy is showing,” Ranger said.

“Psychology, asshole,” Ace reminded him.

“Right,” Bandit said. “Doesn’t help your sour demeanor.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m a fucking ray of sunshine.” Ace couldn’t keep a straight face, and they all laughed again. Rip wandered in and made a direct line for the coffee pot. “Did Ranger make this?”

“No,” everyone said at the same time.

“Thank God,” Rip whispered, pouring some of it into a cup. “My head is killing me.”

“Too much of a good thing?” Deacon asked. It wasn’t like his guys to drink too much, especially in a foreign country.

“No. I only had three drinks all night.” He turned to look at Ranger. “Right?”

Ranger nodded. “Yeah. Three, and we didn’t leave them unattended.”

“I’ve got some stuff.” Bandit got up. “Don’t throw that away.” He pointed at his half-eaten plate. “Eat something, Rip. Taking this shit on an empty stomach isn’t advised.”

Rip nodded and found the pastries. He had an infamous sweet tooth, but he didn’t devour the pastry like he usually would. Deacon fixed another pot of coffee and waited until Rip had taken the meds. “You go back to bed. The others will clear up and get ready to move out.”

“Okay.” Rip walked out of the kitchen without any argument.

“Damn,” Bandit said what they were all thinking. Rip had to be hurting if he didn’t argue about helping out.

“Keep an eye on him.”

“You know it,” Ranger said, speaking for everyone. He nodded to Deacon. “You better get going, or you’ll be late.”

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He glanced at his watch. “Yeah.” He lifted his coffee and took a drink. “My comms are in my room. We’ll hook up with Click and management as soon as I have the mission brief.”

“Copy, we’ll do another sweep of the apartment,” Ranger added. They all knew the needs of operational security.

“Roger that.” Deacon downed the last of his coffee. “I’ll be back.”

Returning to his room, he brushed his teeth and grabbed his wallet and keycard. It took three minutes to make it to the main floor and another two to find the conference room they’d use. It wasn’t difficult. Two black-suited men stood outside.

“Deacon Alexander,” he said by way of introduction when he arrived at the door and showed his Guardian credentials in his wallet.

“I need to search you, sir,” one of the suits said.

“I have no doubt.” He knew how the CIA worked. He handed the man his wallet and lifted his arms. An electronic sweep followed the pat down. His wallet was searched and swept before it was given back to him. His watch and cell phone stayed outside the room with the guards.

Deacon opened the door and walked in. “Deacon?” The older gentleman at the head of the table stood.

“Yes, sir.” He moved to the head of the table and offered his hand.

“I’m Supervisory Officer Tim Flanagan. We’re waiting for the asset you’ll take on this mission.”

That wasn’t unusual. For the most part, the CIA used Guardian as a protective detail for their assets so they could slip into an area or slip out. Guardian Security was the only federally recognized, privately-owned security company in the world. They performed missions and duties federal organizations couldn’t touch due to red tape and tied hands. Guardian protected those who couldn’t protect themselves and had numerous arms to do so, with domestic teams like Deacon’s and black ops assassins who went after the worst of the monsters the world needed eliminated. No, they didn’t have the same constraints, and they weren’t federally funded. They had the best of everything because the owner of the company mandated it. Of course, the owner was his father, but no one knew that. It was information that was tightly safeguarded at the highest level, and that was for everyone’s safety.

Deacon lifted an eyebrow and asked, “Where are we going?”

“We can get into that when our specialist arrives.” Officer Flanagan pointed to the coffee carafe. “Would you like a cup?”

“Thank you.” After accepting a cup, he sat down beside Flanagan.

“I know Jason King well. He’s a font of integrity.”

“I agree.” Deacon nodded. Jason was the true leader of Guardian Security now that his father had officially retired for the last time.

“I remember when Gabriel was running the organization back in the day. He was an intense man. Did you ever meet him?” The officer took a sip of his coffee.

Deacon smiled. Yeah, he’d met his dad a time or two. “I have.”

“Then you’ve met one in a million. His drive and determination laid the foundation for that company. I had a friend who joined him back when the organization was young. Frank Marshall. I lost track of him, but that man was another intense guy. He was a country hick but had a great future with Guardian. I’ve never seen such loyalty to an organization.”

Uncle Frank was country through and through. Deacon smiled and shrugged. “It isn’t loyalty to an organization, exactly. It’s loyalty to the people in the organization. I’ve never met anyone in Guardian I wouldn’t lay my life down for or the other way around if needed. Integrity.”

“See, that’s what people don’t understand. Integrity is a concept that’s hard to teach,” Flanagan said before glancing at his watch. “Not like our specialist to be late.”

“Traffic sucks in the city, and it’s rush hour.” Deacon wasn’t too impressed with the asset if they couldn’t be on time.

The officer made some noise of agreement, but his words were interrupted by a knock on the door. “Enter,” he barked.

Deacon blinked and did a double-take when the specialist entered. Then he stood and smiled.

Echo walked through the door. Her hair was wound in a tight bun at the back of her head. Her black slacks and crisp white shirt under a black blazer didn’t hug her figure today. She looked positively matronly, but he’d seen what was under the oversized clothes.

Echo stopped and blinked, looking at him. Her surprise was clearly displayed. The officer looked between them. “Do you two know each other?”

“We do,” Deacon said. “We met at a restaurant last night. She had an issue with the bartender not understanding her. Good to see you again.”

Echo took his hand, and the spark between them hadn’t lessened. She smiled. “And you. Small city, isn’t it?”

“It would seem.”

“This seems rather redundant, but Echo Lashay, this is Deacon Alexander, the lead for the team that will escort you in and out of Laos.”

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Deacon narrowed his eyes at the officer. “When?”

“Immediately,” Echo replied.

He lifted an eyebrow and looked at her. “Why?”

She glanced at the officer, and he spoke. “Four days ago, a piece of hardware was stolen from our facilities in Virginia. An officer provided assistance, access, and intelligence to the Triad of the Serpent.”

Deacon sat back and stared at the officer. “So, we’re retrieving hardware?”

“No, not exactly.” Echo sat down. “Sir, do I have permission?”

“He has the clearance.” The man nodded.

“The device is a storage unit for our most sensitive material. In this case, the device contains the locations, cover aliases, and contact information for our undercover officers currently embedded in foreign countries. The host countries don’t know they’re there. These officers have been in a communications blackout, relying on periodic encrypted updates to indicate their safety and operational progress. The data on the device includes the last-known coordinates of these officers along with critical operational details needed to extract them. These coordinates are encoded in a way that requires decryption within a specific timeframe, or the information will delete itself, leaving the officers stranded in dangerous situations.”

Officer Flanagan interjected, “Echo’s expertise is needed to access the coordinates

and extract actionable data immediately to avoid a fatal delay. Your team is there to protect her because these coordinates could mean life or death for our officers. If the data isn't accessed immediately, these officers are effectively cut off, with a high chance of capture or death."

Deacon frowned. "There isn't any redundancy for this equipment?"

Officer Flanagan sighed and shook his head. "No, it was a single point of failure that Echo had warned us about, but ..."

"I was ignored." She lifted an eyebrow and stared at Officer Flanagan.

"She was," he admitted.

"Why does she need to go? We can go in, recover it, and bring it out."

Echo placed her hands on her hips. "We don't have time for you to bring it out, and I have to be the one to open it. I created it, and it works on bio-locks. I'm one of three people who can unlock the device. If I don't open it, the information will be wiped, and we won't be able to reach the officers. That means the information will be lost if anyone tries to open it before we arrive." She shook her head. The burden of what had happened was clearly on her shoulders. "It should never have been accessible."

Flanagan agreed. "We're making internal changes to ensure no more single points of failure. The rogue officer was cornered, and he shot himself rather than be taken. Before he died, he told the officers surrounding him the device was being taken to Laos, and we've connected money the officer received to the Triad."

Deacon lifted an eyebrow. The Triad was the largest cartel in the area and responsible for a long line of money, death, destruction, and political turmoil. They'd fought the fuckers numerous times.

Deacon crossed his arms. “It’s a big country.”

Flanagan reached for a map lying beside him and unrolled it. “We’ve corroborated information on three camps that the Triad occupy.”

Echo leaned over with him and pointed to the locations on the map. “Here, here, and here.”

Deacon studied the map. He knew the country, and the problems of reaching any camps without detection were stacked against them. “Which one first?”

“This one.” Echo tapped the map and extended her hand. Flanagan gave her a manila envelope, and she withdrew several satellite images showing the camp and its setup.

After committing the photos to memory, he dropped them. Then he stood up and studied the map, asking, “And if this isn’t the camp?”

“We move on to the other camps.” She sighed. “My gut tells me this will be the camp. If our intelligence is accurate, it has the most infrastructure and a communications node. Selling and disseminating the information would be a priority for them. They don’t know they can’t hack the system. If they go past the fail safes and attempt to open it, the information is gone.”

“So, a calculated risk.” He could deal with that.

“Based on the best information we could obtain, yes.” Echo nodded.

He cocked his head and asked, “Why weren’t we briefed yesterday if we’re working against the clock? We were all in country.”

Flanagan drew a deep breath. “We needed clearance to share this information with

you, and coordinating the release took a while. As a matter of fact, I only received the final approval five minutes before you walked in the door. We've been attempting to place our own resources for the extraction, but we don't have a team available." Flanagan rubbed his head. "No organization likes to admit they've fucked up, but I agree, we've wasted valuable time."

Deacon hated the fact that saving face took priority over saving lives, but honestly, it didn't surprise him that any government agency would focus on reputation before repairing the fucking issue. He looked at Flanagan. "Logistics?"

"I've been in contact with Guardian without my organization's knowledge. In my position, I knew what we needed, and Jason King and I have been coordinating the response. I'll deal with any reprimand that may come my way over that. We have a transport aircraft on the tarmac waiting. My men will transport you and Echo to the plane."

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Deacon stared at the map on the table. “All right, I’ll contact Guardian as soon as I get back to my team. Do you have a go-bag ready?”

“I threw one together. It’s been years since I’ve been in the field.” Echo grimaced. “I’m in shape, physically. I have an old uniform that will work, but I don’t have any weapons or climate gear.”

“We can outfit you for the most part.” Deacon rubbed his chin. “Each transport has essential equipment for the areas they cover.” He glanced at her, assessing her size. “Boot size?”

“I have jungle boots,” she replied.

“Yeah, but it’s monsoon season. You’ll need water-repellant boots, rain gear, and such.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “Male size six. Female eights.”

“We’ll do the best we can,” he said before asking, “You realize we’re going to have to parachute in?”

Echo nodded. “It’s been a long time, but I’ve been through jump school at Fort Benning, and I have my wings.”

“So, you’ve jumped before? That will help.” Deacon was slightly impressed. Check that. Hewasimpressed. For some reason, he’d figured she was at a desk or behind the line most of her time in the military. He turned to Flanagan. “Is there anything else?”

Flanagan stood up. “Echo has all the additional information needed for this mission. It’s essential we get that device and the information is delivered to us. Guardian assures me they can communicate the information to us without it being intercepted. You must have some high-tech comm devices.”

Deacon smiled at Flanagan. “Guardian has communication technology that most of the world doesn’t.”

Echo’s eyebrows shot up toward her hairline. “The rest of the world doesn’t have it? I can’t wait to see how it works.”

Deacon looked at her. “That will have to be approved.”

Flanagan shoved his hands in his pockets. “Good luck. Echo, I know this doesn’t mean squat right now, but I’ll do whatever I need to do to ensure your section is listened to.”

Echo huffed out a harsh breath and tried to smile. “Thank you for your assistance.”

Deacon was ready to get to work. “If there’s nothing else we need to be briefed on, let’s go.”

They exited the room, retrieved their belongings, and Deacon shouldered Echo’s go-bag, which she’d left with the guards. She grabbed a small suitcase, and they walked down the hall. Once they were out of the earshot of the officers at the door, she looked at Deacon and elbowed him. “So, how are you doing this morning, Sparky?” Her laughter was contagious. Deacon shook his head. This woman had so much sass.

He glanced over at her. “You realize you’ll pay for that, right?”

She laughed again. “Oh, I was counting on it. I saw your note and put your number in

my phone. I wanted to text this morning, but frankly, I wasn't sure when I would be back in the States." She sighed. "I've been anxious about being in the field again, but I'm the only one who can complete it."

"Why's that? You said there were three who could open it."

"Yeah, and the other two are ancient. One has a heart condition, and the other is a diabetic on insulin." She looked over at him. "The CIA may employ me, but I'm not a field officer, nor is anyone in my section. All my field experience was in the military, which they discount out of hand. That's why all our communication and concerns have been pigeon-holed. We're typical employees with layers and layers of management over us."

Deacon could clearly see the stress of the situation weighing on her. He called the elevator with his keycard. "It won't be easy. I'm not going to blow smoke up your skirt and tell you it will be, but I've never lost an asset on a mission, and I certainly don't plan to start with you."

She smiled briefly. "That is really good to know. I'm glad we met last night, that what happened ... well, happened, and that you're the man in charge of getting me in and out of the country. On the way over here this morning, I worried that whoever was in charge of the team was an asshole or a royal jerk."

"Oh, I can be an asshole." Deacon chuckled as they entered the elevator, and he tapped his card again to take them to the suite level.

She nudged him with her shoulder. "You know what I mean."

"I do. I'll ask you how you want to play this, though."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

He turned to face her. “We know each other. How well we let my team know we know each other is up to you to decide.” He wasn’t taking that power away from her. He’d play it the way she wanted it to run.

“Oh.” She blinked and looked at the elevator door as it opened. “Will they think less of me?”

“For what?”

“Being a one-night stand?”

“You’re not a one-night stand in my mind.” He took her arm and walked her out of the elevator before the door shut on them. “You’re a friend of mine. A close friend. They don’t need to know anything more than that.”

She nodded. “That works, and thank you for not saying anything more to Flanagan about last night.”

He stopped her in front of the suite he shared with his team. “I told you last night I would never treat anyone that way. You can trust me.”

She stared up at him. Her chocolate-colored eyes were something he could get lost in so easily. “I’m trusting you with my life and the life of officers around the world.”

Deacon blinked. “Well, damn, no pressure there.”

She laughed, and then he opened the door and yelled, “Lady on deck!”

CHAPTER 5

Echo blinked at the warning but went through the door anyway. A huge man came out of the kitchenette with what looked like half a Danish. He swallowed hard, then tossed the Danish back onto the counter. Wiping his hands on his jeans, he extended one. “Hi, my handle is Ranger. I’m his second in command.”

“Ranger, nice to meet you. I’m Echo.”

The man cocked his head. “Is that your call sign?”

“No. Believe it or not, that’s my real name.” She laughed.

“Awesome name.” Ranger smiled at her and turned to Deacon. “Everything is good to go.”

“Copy. Let me grab my comms, and we’ll discuss the plan with everyone.” Turning to Echo, he told her, “I’ll be right back.” Then he left the room.

Three other men came out of the other side of the suite, and Ranger quickly introduced them. “That’s Ace, the next one is Bandit, our medic, and the last is Rip. Guys, this is Echo, real name, not a handle.”

She shook each of their hands. “Nice to meet you.”

“Where are we heading?” Ace asked her.

She blinked at the blunt question, but Ranger spoke up. “Cap is going to brief us all.”

Deacon walked back into the room and tapped his ear. “Okay, Click, are you online?”

The men all nodded at the same time. Echo’s curiosity took over. “Wait, where’s your transmitter?” She walked up to Deacon and pulled his shirt collar out. He slapped at her hands, but she wouldn’t be deterred. Stepping to the side, she pulled the bottom of his ear. “Come down here. I want to see that.”

“Hey, stop that.” Deacon grabbed her hand and held it. “Click, get permission for Echo to have comms. We’re going to need them in the jungle.”

“Yeah, get me permission. I want to see that nanotechnology. That’s James Bond

type stuff. Is your transmitter and receiver in the same system? Is it closed or open communications?” She stood on her toes and grabbed his shoulder to look into his ear again. What she’d seen before wasn’t nearly enough. Deacon put his arm around her and spun her away from him.

“Behave yourself, woman, or I’ll spank you.”

She put her hands on her hips. “That isn’t fair. You can hear what’s going on, and I can’t.” She glanced at the men across the room and stopped. All four of them stood with jaws dropped, staring at her and Deacon. She pointed at Deacon and then herself. “Good friends.”

Ranger snapped his jaw shut and cleared his throat. “Obviously.”

She wasn’t going to let their reaction detract her from her interest in the comm device. “Seriously, how long will it take?”

Ace moved suddenly, going back into the area he came from. She looked at Deacon. “Did I do that?”

Deacon laughed. “No, Click got approval for you to have a device. Ace is getting you one.”

“Oh.” She straightened her shoulders and smiled in victory. “Good.” Ace was back a moment later with a case in his hand.

“These are comms we use for emergencies or when someone needs access,” Deacon said. “He’s going to measure your ear and give you the best fit we have.”

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Echo turned her head to Ace, who took a moment to find the correct size. When he handed it to her, Deacon took it from her and put it into her ear. “To activate the device, you tap your ear here.” Deacon touched her ear. “Tap it twice to mute it. You can still hear them, but they can’t hear you. Three times will turn it off. Don’t do that.”

“That is so cool. I can hear you through the device and hear face-to-face, but there isn’t any latency.” Echo looked at each of them. “Do you know how advanced this tech is?”

They all chuckled. A man with a heavy Boston accent came across the system. “Can we start now?”

“Oh, who was that?”

“My name is Click, and we have a briefing to start.”

“Click. Nice to meet you. I’m Echo.”

“Yep. Your security clearance has been transferred from the CIA, and you have the necessary clearances to use the comm systems. However, you will be required to sign an NDA after the mission.”

“That won’t be a problem,” she assured Click.

“Yeah, I know. Cap, the plane is refueling as we speak. We’re going to drop you into Laos and do our best to jam their systems. Communist countries don’t seem to like us

flying over their country.”

Deacon snorted. “No shit. We’ll need to equip Echo.”

“Archangel had a shipment sent to Hawaii two days ago. It’s in the plane,” Click said.

“Well, thank the guy for me, will you?” Echo said.

“Right, I’ll call him up and do that.” Click laughed. She frowned and looked at Deacon.

Deacon rolled his eyes. “He’s one of the three people who run Guardian.”

“Oh.” She didn’t have anything else to add. Guardian was the flagbearer for all intelligence and operational agencies. Being one of the three people who ran that organization meant he was a very powerful man.

“We’ve been monitoring the primary site that Flanagan gave us. Right now, it appears to have minimal activity. The nearest village is ten clicks to the east. There’s river access as long as it isn’t past flood stage. You have storms moving in. Two days, and you’ll be very, very wet.”

“Exit strategy?” Deacon asked.

“Working it,” Click confirmed. “Fluid at this point, and with an incursion into Laos’s airspace, it could be you and the team walking or floating out.”

“Not particularly thrilled with that last option,” Bandit said.

“None of us are,” Click said. “I’m working it, guys. It’s going to be a mess. The system that’s coming is a bastard. Excuse my French, ma’am.”

“I served for eight years, Click. I’m not going to wither from a few curse words,” Echo said. “So, we’re doing a low-level drop during daylight hours.”

“That’s the plan.”

She closed her eyes and grimaced. “Great. You do know that technique was developed for equipment, right?”

“Welcome to Guardian,” Deacon said, dropping his arm over her shoulder. “We’ve perfected the process.”

“God, I hope so.” She looked up at him. “Remember what I said about being worried if the person leading this mission could be an asshole or a jerk?”

He pulled back a bit and frowned. “Yeah. Why?”

“I think I should’ve been worrying about him being bat-shit crazy and having a death wish.”

All of the men laughed at that. “We got you covered, Echo,” Ace said. “Just remember to tuck and roll when you hit the ground.”

She turned to Ace. “And you realize we’re dropping into a jungle. What am I going to roll into?”

Laughing again, the men seemed to relax a bit. “Click, do you have anything else?”

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“No. I’ll let you know when we get an exit strategy finalized. Get yourself to the aircraft. We have all the supplies you’ll need loaded.”

“Roger, we’re en route.” Deacon tapped his ear twice, and Echo did the same.

She looked at him. “Honestly, I might not give this device back. I want to dissect it and see how it works.”

“Sorry, but I signed for that earpiece. I’m not paying for not bringing it back,” Ace said. He looked at Deacon. “No matter how good of friends you are with Cap.”

“Speaking of which, Echo is to be treated with all the respect you would give me.”

“Like we wouldn’t?” Ranger said. “I’m offended.” The guy crossed his arms over his chest. Oh, man, Echo would not like to see him mad.

“Yeah, you look offensive,” Deacon said, and the big guy laughed at his own insult.

“What do you think we are, total assholes?” Ace said. “Oh, wait, yeah, you do. Never mind.”

“Nah, he’s just staking a claim.” Bandit chuckled. Echo blinked, and her jaw dropped at that comment.

Rip, who hadn’t said much to that point, just nodded.

Deacon tilted his head. “How’s the headache, Rip?”

“Nothing I can’t shake,” Rip said. “Are we ready?”

“We are,” Deacon said. “Echo, call your driver, we’re heading out.”

She watched the team scatter and used the hotel phone to call down to have the transport van meet them out front. By the time she’d hung up, they were back, and her bags were picked up along with all of theirs.

“Hey, I can carry that,” she said to Rip, who was toting her small suitcase.

“No, ma’am. Not going to let a lady carry her bag,” Rip said and moved out.

“Okaaaaay ...” She glanced at Deacon. “I can carry my weight. I’m not a liability.”

“We wouldn’t let you be.” He put his hand on her back and moved her forward.
“Time to go.”

They traveled down to the van and were silent on the drive to the airport. When they arrived, Deacon’s men secured their belongings in big lockers at the front of the plane. Deacon told her to turn off the mute of her comm system so they could hear her, and then they went to a storage area near the lockers and started building bags. Deacon called her over and outfitted her with everything the men were pulling for themselves. He fitted the backpack on her shoulders and waist. A thigh holster with a nine mil was given to her. She was extremely proficient with the handgun and noticed the men were also carrying M-4s. Rip packed several smaller packages into his kit, and she knew what they were as soon as she saw the triggering devices that went in separately.

Bandit’s kit carried medical supplies and several other small pieces of equipment. Rip and Deacon’s kit carried extra food. She grabbed as many bags of MREs as would fit in her backpack and stuffed them on top of the other items. Deacon frowned, but

before he could say anything, she stood up and put her hands on her hips. “I’m strong, and I’m fit. I’m not taking advantage of the fact that I have five alpha males with me by playing the poor little woman. That is insulting to all women who have trail-blazed paths through the military and other professions.” She took the uniform and boots from him and the water-repellent socks and went toward the small changing area on the other side of the plane.

“I didn’t mean to insult you.” She jumped, looking for Deacon, and then realized he was probably outside the changing room opening.

“You didn’t. You insulted all the other women. You’re good with me, Sparky.” She stripped out of her black suit and put on the black and dark green camouflaged uniform before taking her hair down and putting it into a braid with a black piece of material that would inevitably loosen and fall around her face. Then she put on her thigh holster, adjusted it to fit her, and pulled out the automatic. She dropped the magazine, cleared the chamber, and got the feel of the weapon. After putting the bullet back in the magazine, she loaded it and chambered a round. It had been a long time since she’d been in the field, but when she was there, she knew her shit. It would come back to her, and she would not be a liability. She trusted Deacon and his men to get her in and out of the communist country, and they trusted her to complete her mission. She wouldn’t let anyone down.

She walked out into the cavernous hold of the aircraft and grabbed her backpack. “Well, damn, you turned into a mercenary pretty easy,” Ace said.

She smiled at him. “Not quite a mercenary, but yeah, old habits die hard.”

“You can say that again.” Ace snorted.

“Everyone, take your seats. We’ve been cleared for takeoff,” Deacon said from somewhere toward the back of the plane.

“Whoa, I heard that like he was standing beside me.” She blinked and then looked at Ace.

“Don’t know how it works, but even if he were to scream, we’d hear it at the perfect volume. Click is in the States somewhere, and there’s no lag, no transmission issues, and the weather doesn’t affect the dependability.”

“Rock and metal do, sometimes, especially old mine shafts about a mile down,” Bandit said as he walked past.

Echo shouldered her pack and walked to the jump seats bolted to the aircraft's frame. She shoved her backpack in the webbing that would keep it secure, sat down, and strapped herself in. Deacon sat beside her. She frowned and looked at the men. “Don’t we need hearing protection?”

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“Nope,” Bandit said. “With the exception of explosions, the earpieces are noise canceling. I’m told they’re working on the explosions. Something to do with the change of pressure.”

The aircraft's engine whined and started, and the earpieces worked exactly as Bandit had described. She popped her eyes wide and looked at Deacon. “This is freaking incredible.”

He nodded. “All the best toys.”

“Speaking of which, I know they can’t drop us into the jungle. That’s a death sentence, so we’re probably going to be dropped in along the river.”

“In the river,” Deacon said with a smile.

“In the river. Right, because drowning with these packs on isn’t a thing.” She laughed, and then, leaning forward to look at the other men, she said, “Did I mention bat-shit crazy?”

Laughter lingered in her ears as the plane released its brakes and powered forward.

Echo closed her eyes and prayed she could keep up and not cause the team any problems. She wasn’t a field officer. But she knew what to do. She’d watch, learn, and keep up. If she had a question, she’d ask. After all, the comms ...

A realization hit her, and she turned suddenly to Deacon. She mouthed, They heard me call you Sparky. The look he gave her told her they had and that she was in some

deep shit about it, too. She blinked at him and then laughed. A deep, hard belly laugh. What else could she do?

CHAPTER 6

Deacon, his team, and Echo moved to the back of the aircraft. Together, they positioned the equipment they'd need and checked the rigging. They didn't have long until the drop. The two and a half hours it would take to get to the Nam Ou River meant they'd spend every minute working. Echo pitched in and worked just as hard as the men. His respect for her grew with each passing minute.

Ranger double-checked the parachute rigging after he'd finished. Just when he'd straightened and given him the thumbs up, the light in the hold changed from white to amber. His team went to their parachutes without being told, and Echo followed suit. He stopped her. "You're tandem jumping with me."

She frowned and snapped, "I can do this."

He put his hand on her arm. "I know you can, but any asset, I repeat, any asset, always jumps with one of us. It's policy to protect the people entrusted to our care."

She stared at him and narrowed her eyes. "You're not pulling my leg?"

"No, he isn't," Ranger chimed in. "Three missions ago, I got stuck with a guy from some drug enforcement squad assigned to a host national task force. He smelled like a wet dog had rolled in a dead skunk. His breath was worse."

Bandit laughed. "You got the short straw."

"I always get the short straw."

“Because you’re so damn big, everything is a short straw for you,” Rip said, ducking a swipe from Ranger.

“You must be feeling better,” Ranger said as he buckled into his parachute.

“Yep. That stuff Bandit gave me saved the day.”

Deacon was glad for his team’s help in belaying her fears. She was going to be a handful. Her determination and stubbornness could benefit or distract them if they weren’t channeled correctly. He held her harness as she slipped it on and buckled it. After, he checked her harness, and she checked his—standard procedure when jumping. Then he attached the back of her harness to the front of his, and they hooked up to the line. It would pull the chutes ripcord as soon as they cleared the aircraft. With only a few hundred feet to fall, any delay in the chute opening could be deadly.

The light turned red, and Deacon hit the button to open the back bay door. The transport plane’s drone over the dense jungle canopy below reverberated back to them. The plane skimmed just a few hundred feet above the Nam Ou River. The water revealed the river’s winding path, cutting through Laos’s harsh, forested mountains. The team had seconds to prepare as the green signal light flickered inside the cargo hold.

The motorboats—compact, reinforced, and equipped with high-powered, ultra-quiet battery-operated motors—slid from the plane’s belly, parachutes blossoming behind them as they descended into the humid night. Each boat splashed into the river precisely, creating controlled ripples that vanished quickly in the river’s swirling currents. Behind them, the team followed, each man free-falling for a few tense seconds before his chute deployed. In the daylight, Deacon watched shadows drifting downward like silent ghosts. The ground came quickly. “Soft knees,” he reminded Echo. She nodded her head but didn’t say anything. Boots touched down in shallow water or on the river’s narrow sandbanks. In perfect synchronization, he and Echo hit

the ground and lurched forward, rolling with the momentum of the fall. As soon as they stopped, he unfastened the tandem harness, and they pulled the chute's material to them. The team regrouped and began securing their equipment.

The soft hum of motors broke the stillness as the boats came to life. Twin battery engines powered them soundlessly upriver against the gentle current. Everyone aboard remained alert, their sharp eyes scanning the tree-lined shores for any sign of movement. Every so often, a flickered glimpse of a distant village flashed by, but otherwise, the jungle towered over them. Its tangled vines and towering bamboo cast jagged shadows across the water.

The Nam Ou was both a blessing and a pain in the ass. Wide stretches allowed for swift navigation, but the occasional narrow bends and clusters of jagged rocks tested their skill. In places, the river narrowed into fast-moving channels, forcing the team to slow, grab the boat by the handles attached to the side, and power them over the jagged rocks. The jungle pressed close in these locations, and the humidity smothered each of them. The upside was that the dense foliage offered cover, and they'd take every advantage.

Every crackle of a branch or distant birdcall sent a ripple of tension through Deacon. He sensed the same tension in his team and Echo. She'd worked hard and stayed silent like the rest of the team. Echo was a warrior, and he was damn proud of her.

As night approached, a light mist rose from the water, lingering over the surface like a veil of smoke. The team pressed on, the boats moving through the fog silently. Occasionally, they paused in shadowed inlets to check their bearings and regroup. The muted sounds of them passing water to each other blended into the river's murmur. For now, the river was their silent ally, carrying them deeper toward the heart of their target's location.

Click's voice came softly over the comms. "Two hundred yards farther up on your

left is the best place to put into shore.”

Deacon’s fingers tightened around the tiller as he whispered, “Copy that.” The river rippled in the dim light, its surface shimmering under the moon’s faint glow. He guided the lead boat toward the sandy inlet Click had identified, the muted engine drone blending with the jungle's soft rustle.

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The team moved with practiced precision, their movements as quiet as the jungle around them. Feet hit the sand, muffled by the soft, shifting grains as they hauled the boats ashore. “As far as we can carry them,” Deacon whispered, his voice cutting through the thick, humid air. He didn’t need to remind them why—his team had seen this river swallow miles of land during monsoon season.

Although the darkness provided merciful relief from the sun, it was an obstacle in its own right. The oppressive canopy overhead blocked out even the faintest starlight, leaving the world around them a shadowy maze. They moved in single file, their machetes hacking at the dense foliage, the sharp metallic ring of steel striking vines occasionally piercing the jungle sounds.

Progress was agonizingly slow. The jungle pushed back at every step, its tangled undergrowth clutching their boots and slowing their advance. Sweat trickled down Deacon’s back, soaking into his gear. The boats were heavy, but they were a lifeline—a vital exit strategy in case the mission went sideways. Better to suffer now than regret it later.

When they reached towering trees that had weathered countless storms, they anchored the boats securely, tying them to thick trunks that could withstand even the heaviest floods. With equipment strapped to their backs, they camouflaged the watercraft with foliage and netting before pressing on, their steps muffled by the thick jungle floor.

As they trudged toward the camp, Deacon found himself behind Echo. Her movements were purposeful, each step fueled by determination. Exhaustion pressed down on everyone, but she didn’t falter. Her grit was impressive, and it didn’t go

unnoticed.

When they stopped for a brief rest, Deacon sank beside her. He passed her his canteen, the cool metal slick with condensation. “How are you doing?”

She accepted it without hesitation, taking a long pull of the water before handing it back. “I’m exhausted,” she admitted, her voice raw with fatigue. “But then again, everyone looks tired.”

Deacon tipped the canteen to his lips and drained it, the tepid water doing little to refresh him. “Hell, yes, we’re tired,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “This heat would take it out of anyone.”

“How much farther?” she asked, brushing damp strands of hair from her face.

“Five clicks, that way.” He pointed north and east, his hand cutting through the humid air like a blade. “Once we get there, we’ll observe before making a move. Going in blind is suicide.”

She nodded, her focus sharpening. “Makes sense. Whoever’s working on this will need electricity—and a computer. Or, at least, they’ll think they do. The device is standalone, but it’s designed to look like part of a system. Fake wires and all.”

Deacon frowned, wiping sweat from his brow. “You’re masking your device? From whom? Your own people?”

Echo leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “I’m not sure if you know this, but nobody trusts anyone at the CIA.”

The low chuckles from his team broke through the humidity. Deacon rolled his eyes, smirking.

“She fits right in, Cap.” Ranger grinned as he took another drink from his canteen.

Echo shook her head slowly. “Not really. The humidity is turning my hair into a frizz show, and I can smell myself from where you’re sitting.”

Deacon chuckled, a rare moment of levity cutting through the strain. She pulled out her own canteen, taking a sip before handing it to him. “When this is all over, I’m finding an office with air conditioning and carpet so plush it feels like heaven under my feet. Barefoot luxury—that’s my dream.” She lifted her boots and wiggled her feet around while pointing to them. “Not barefoot. Not happy.”

Ace snorted, taking a swig of water. “Mighty opinionated on what you want, aren’t you?”

She tilted her head, pretending to ponder his question. “Extremely, but I’m unsure where ‘mighty’ and ‘extremely’ fall on the opinionated continuum. Is mighty more or less than extremely?”

Rip laughed. “She’s a keeper, Cap. How come we haven’t met her before?”

Echo raised an eyebrow at Deacon, a playful smirk tugging at her lips. “Yeah, how come they haven’t met me before?”

Deacon shook his head, the corners of his mouth twitching. “My personal life stays personal.”

“Which means he doesn’t trust us around someone special,” Bandit said, earning a round of low laughter.

Echo turned to Deacon, her eyes filled with mischief. “Am I special?”

He stood, stretching his shoulders. “Oh, you’re about as special as they come.”

She got to her feet, raising her canteen in a mock toast. “Good to know, Sparky.”

Ranger choked on his water, coughing as Rip slapped him on the back. “Sparky?”

Echo batted her eyelashes. “Oops. Did I let the pet name out of the bag?”

Deacon tapped his ear twice and then hers. “For the second time, remember the aircraft? Payback’s going to be my pleasure.”

She grinned, activating her comms as she passed him. Her quiet laugh drifted back to him like a tease on the humid breeze.

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Bandit's voice broke the moment. "So, why does she call you Sparky, Cap?"

Deacon's only response was a one-finger salute, drawing more laughter from his team.

Five miles later, with their backpacks concealed, Deacon, Ranger, and Bandit moved ahead to recon the camp.

Tucked deep within the jungle, the camp was concealed by a dense canopy of towering trees and thick undergrowth. The location was deliberate—miles from the nearest village with no clear trails leading in or out. The faint hum of insects and the occasional cry of distant nocturnal wildlife were the only sounds that could be heard.

The camp's centerpiece was a communications shed constructed from corrugated metal sheets and wood that appeared to have been scavenged. Its walls were patched with camouflaged tarps, blending the obvious manmade structure into the jungle's greenery. A rusted satellite dish perched at an extreme angle on the shed's roof, tilting skyward. Tangled wires snaked from the building to a portable generator that hummed faintly nearby.

Deacon moved as close to the shed as he dared, keeping concealed under the brush near an old vacant tent that looked like it had been decaying on its frame for at least ten years. He used his night vision scope and looked through the glass sheets making up the shed's windows. The shed was cramped, with outdated radios and monitors cluttering a makeshift desk. Maps and documents covered the walls, and the faint glow of LED screens cast an eerie light through the scope. There was no human movement in the shed or at this portion of the camp.

Quietly and cautiously, he moved deeper into the camp. Not far from the shed, a cluster of bunkhouses formed a semicircle. The crude structures were little more than wooden shacks topped with tin roofs. Hammocks hung between the posts inside, and the air was filled with the stale scent of unwashed bodies and damp fabric. Snore seeped out of the open windows, and bodies pulled the hammocks tightly against the bolts fixed to the walls. Weapons leaned casually against the walls, while personal belongings—clothes, boots, and hats—were scattered across the bunks. A central fire pit lay cold and dark, its ashes dispersed from the last meal.

Around the camp, natural barriers of jagged rocks and thick bamboo made approaching undetected tricky. Camouflage netting stretched across key areas, obscuring the view from aerial surveillance. Deacon moved carefully and quietly. With no outpost or guard, he moved among the buildings to gather intel on how many were in the camp and what assets they had.

The surrounding jungle was a maze of thorny vines, giant ferns, and towering teak trees. Narrow trails, barely visible under layers of fallen leaves, hinted at well-worn paths used by the jungle's smaller animals. A hidden watchtower, little more than a platform perched high in the trees, overlooked the camp, providing an ideal vantage point for guards. However, there were no guards on the platform tonight, and nothing indicated that the men inside the hammocks were on alert or awaiting the arrival of a delivery.

Deacon whispered in a low murmur that barely stirred the heavy jungle air, "Rendezvous at our camp." Without waiting for a reply, he melted into the shadows, rejoining his team. The night was dense and suffocating, the humidity wrapping around them like a damp shroud. Even though they'd put distance between themselves and the camp, caution weighed heavily. He motioned for the team to huddle, their movements quiet, with only whispers of fabric brushed against the undergrowth.

“There are minimal weapons. No one on watch,” he said softly, his tone edged with skepticism. His sharp gaze flicked to Echo, her silhouette barely visible in the moonlight that filtered through the canopy. “I’m not sure this is the camp we’re looking for. The comm gear in that shack is ancient—practically museum pieces.”

Echo clenched her jaw, the faint crunch of her teeth audible in the stillness, and then swore under her breath. “Then we move to the next camp. I thought for sure this was the place.” The frustration in her voice was palpable.

Ranger leaned forward, his eyes glittering in the faint light. “Could be the Triad lets this place be seen for a reason,” he suggested, his voice rough with weariness. “A decoy.”

Deacon nodded grimly. “Makes sense. Click? How far to the next camp?”

“Twenty miles through the jungle to your northwest. You’ll have to skirt the mountain,” Click replied, his Boston accent thicker than usual—a clear sign he was running on fumes.

“Is going over the damn thing faster?” Deacon asked, rubbing the back of his neck where sweat trickled down in a slow, relentless drip.

“You guys are friggin’ insane, but yeah, it is,” Click answered, a wry edge to his words.

Deacon checked his watch. “Five hours until sun-up. We push on and get as close as possible before we sack out.” His command was met with gear rustling as the team strapped on their backpacks. He placed a steadying hand on Echo’s shoulder, his fingers brushing against the damp fabric of her shirt. “Can you hang?”

Her eyes narrowed, an edge of defiance flashing through the exhaustion. “Just watch

me, Sparky.” The challenge in her voice was undeniable, and the corner of his mouth quirked up despite himself.

“Just checking,” he replied lightly, but his gaze held hers for a beat longer.

“But not on them?” she shot back, jerking her head toward the rest of the team.

Deacon glanced over his shoulder at his men, their postures disciplined despite the mission's physical toll. “I’ve worked with them for years. I know their limitations. I don’t know all of yours yet.”

His words hung in the air, and he saw the flicker of understanding in her expression before she pushed past him with a muttered, “We’ll have to fix that, won’t we?”

The trek up the mountain was punishing. The rocky terrain grated beneath their boots while the humidity pushed down on them. The craggy fissures, devoid of clinging vines, allowed them to set a grueling pace. Echo stumbled more than once, her breath coming in quiet gasps, but she never stopped, earning subtle nods of respect from the men.

As they reached the summit, the faint lemon-yellow streaks of dawn painted the horizon. His muscles screamed with every step. His uniform stuck to him like a second skin. Descending into the jungle’s dense canopy, the air grew thick and heavy again, muffling every sound except their labored breathing and the rustle of leaves.

“Cap, the camp is three clicks ahead.” His operator’s voice broke the silence, startling Deacon. The team froze, their gazessnapping to him. He scanned their surroundings, noting the exhaustion etched into their faces. “Here. Hammocks up in the trees. High and hidden. I’ll take first watch.”

Deacon worked quickly, securing a sturdy spot for Echo’s hammock. “You’ll sleep in

mine. I'll take the empty one when I'm relieved." He offered her his hand, pulling her into the branches. Her movements were sluggish, her eyes heavy-lidded with fatigue.

As she settled into the hammock, she murmured, "Think Bandit has some Band-Aids?"

"Why?" Deacon asked, leaning closer.

"Blisters," she muttered sleepily, her voice barely above a whisper. "Nothing bad. Just ... don't want them worse." Before he could respond, her breathing evened out, and she was asleep, her face soft and unguarded in the dim light.

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Rip volunteered for a second watch, his voice steady despite the grim acknowledgment of the sleep he'd sacrifice. The team moved with the efficiency of men accustomed to hardship, each taking their role without complaint. Deacon slid down to the jungle floor, hiding their packs beneath thick foliage before finding a vantage point to keep watch. Echo had impressed him. She held on and kept up with a team that trained for the struggles of the jungle environment. Sharp witted and funny, she'd found favor with all of the team. Even Ace, who was a hard egg to crack. Echo was different. She was a special mix of determination, fight, and personality that ... Hell, she was rather like Ronan's woman, Fleur. Not physically, but the strength of character was there. The determination to see the mission through. The weight of responsibility pressed against his chest, but he welcomed it. His gaze lingered on Echo's hammock above, her presence an unexpected thread of ... something special woven into their relentless mission.

CHAPTER 7

"What?" Echo gasped, her breath catching as she jumped from the sudden weight of a hand on her shoulder. The warmth of it burned through the damp fabric of her shirt, startling her out of the haze of sleep. She twisted around to find Bandit grinning down at her, his expression a mixture of amusement and patience.

"Cap, Ranger, and Ace are doing recon at the camp," he said softly, his voice a soothing rumble in the otherwise silent jungle. "I let you sleep as long as I could, but we better take a look at those blisters."

She groaned, shifting in the hammock. The nylon material crinkled beneath her weight as she tried to sit up, her movements awkward and clumsy. "Here or on the

ground?” she muttered, blinking against the muted light filtering through the canopy.

“I’m not a trapeze artist,” Bandit replied with a smirk. “The ground works better for me. Here, take my hand, and I’ll help you out of that human-sized condom.”

A laugh burst from Echo’s lips, and she slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle it. Her eyes sparkled with humor as she whispered, “You did not just say that.”

“Sorry,” Bandit said, though his grin suggested he wasn’t sorry at all. “That’s what we call them.”

He steadied her as she climbed down, his grip firm yet careful. Echo winced the moment her feet touched the ground, the sharp sting of raw skin and broken blisters shooting up her legs. The new boots, still stiff and damp from sweat and river water, had rubbed her feet mercilessly. The blisters had undoubtedly multiplied, but she gritted her teeth and kept moving. It wasn’t just pride—she wasn’t about to complain when her employer was the reason they were all in the sweltering, relentless jungle.

Bandit gestured to a large, moss-covered rock. “Sit there. I’ll grab my bag.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, hobbling toward the rock. The rough surface was cool against her hands as she hoisted herself up, settling into a position that offered some relief. She’d barely unlaced her first boot when Bandit returned, crouching in front of her with an efficiency born of experience.

“Let me do this,” he said, his tone kind but firm. “I’ve patched up more blisters than I can count.”

“Thanks,” Echo replied, leaning back slightly. She winced as he carefully peeled the boot away, the damp leather sticking to her sock. When he lifted the edge of the sock, his lips pressed into a thin line.

After a moment, he said, “Okay, I’m going to have to soak these socks off. I don’t want to pull on the blisters and make them worse.”

“Whatever it takes,” Echo said, determination masking the pain.

“As long as it takes,” Bandit and Rip said simultaneously over the comms, their voices low and resolute.

Echo blinked at Bandit, her brow furrowing. “Uh ... okay?”

Rip’s voice came through the earpiece, quieter but laced with pride. “Sorry, that’s Guardian’s motto. Whatever it takes, as long as it takes. It means something to each of us. We’re a team, and nothing stops us.”

“Oh,” Echo said, nodding slowly as she watched Bandit work. “Well, that makes sense.”

Bandit gently removed the socks that were matted to her skin. The blisters underneath were red, raw, and angry, and they burned as cool air kissed the broken skin.

“This isn’t too bad,” Bandit said, calm and reassuring. “I’ve treated a lot worse. I’ll get you comfortable.”

Echo bent forward, peering at her mangled feet. “This isn’t bad?” she asked incredulously.

Bandit chuckled softly. “Not at all. We’ll keep an eye on it—clean it, bandage it, and ensure there’s no infection. The jungle loves to breed infection.”

“How long have you been working in this part of the world?” Echo asked, wincing as he dabbed antiseptic on her skin.

Rip's snort came through the comms. "Forever."

Bandit grinned as he continued working. "Our team's been together for six years. We've mostly operated in this region. Each of us speaks at least one local language to help with missions. Cap speaks the most. No overlap, though—we all bring something different to the table."

"Do you ever go back to the States?"

"Sure," Rip answered. "Every three months or so, depending on missions. We get downtime, training, and updates."

Echo watched Bandit's steady hands as he worked, marveling at the near-pain-free way he treated her blisters. "Are any of you married?"

"Nope," Bandit replied, glancing up briefly. "Most women wouldn't appreciate a husband who's only home four months out of the year. Ace has a steady girlfriend who's okay with it, but she dates when he's not around."

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“Yeah,” Echo said with a grimace. “I wouldn’t be happy with that arrangement.”

Bandit shrugged. “Most women aren’t. But we all have the option to leave the team and do something else within the organization if we want. Right now, this is where I want to be.”

“Damn glad to hear it.” Deacon’s voice cut through the comms, sharp and authoritative. “We’re on our way back.”

“Copy,” Rip replied.

“Where’s Rip?” Echo asked, looking around.

“Overwatch,” Bandit said, glancing up at the treetops. “He’s making sure no one’s in the area. That’s why Cap told him they’re on their way back. Friendly fire isn’t exactly a goal here.”

“As if I’d shoot without identifying the target,” Rip scoffed.

“There was that time in North Vietnam ...” Ranger’s teasing drawl echoed through the comms.

Rip grumbled, “Yeah, well, you suck at making coffee.”

Echo smiled at the low rumble of laughter that followed. Bandit looked up and winked at her. “He does suck at making coffee.”

“I do,” Ranger agreed.

Rip’s tone turned serious. “I see you. Nothing on your six so far.”

“Copy,” Deacon acknowledged. Echo turned as the team entered the clearing. Deacon’s sharp gaze went straight to her, his frown deepening when he saw Bandit wrapping her feet. “Why didn’t you say something earlier?” he asked, his voice tight with frustration.

She narrowed her eyes. “Would you have stopped if it were your feet?”

“That’s not the point,” he said, dismissing her protest. “You’re part of this team now. Everyone here is an asset, but more than that—you’re family. We take care of our own. You shouldn’t have let it get this bad.”

Bandit worked quietly, his hands efficient and sure. Echo shrugged. “Well, it’s water under the bridge now. But I promise I won’t gut it out again.”

Deacon sighed, his hand rubbing the back of his neck as if trying to massage away the weight of leadership. His voice softened. “Sorry if I snapped.”

Echo grinned, her eyes bright despite the exhaustion etched into her features. “It’s okay, Sparky. You’re just passionate about your people. I get that.” She paused, tilting her head in thought. “What did you see at the camp? From the satellite images we could get, it didn’t seem as advanced as the last one.”

“Decoy and deception,” Ranger interjected, his voice a low rumble. “What’s visible is stone-age tech, basic and clunky. But the parts hidden under high-tech camo? That’s where the real stuff is.”

Echo glanced between Ranger and Deacon, the gears in her mind turning. “Do you

think they'd bring the device here? There are no roads, no real access points. At least the last site had the Nam Ou River nearby."

Deacon sat beside her on the rock, the heat of his presence contrasting with the cooler stone beneath her. Bandit worked quietly at her feet, his hands steady and methodical. "There are three overwatch positions triangulated for maximum coverage, each set to repel anyone approaching through the jungle. The underground facilities include one with multiple antennas, and two are satellite-based. There's a helipad under the camo netting, and their electricity comes from hydro-generation powered by a nearby stream branching off the Nam Ou River."

Echo frowned, her brow furrowing deeply. "I didn't know hydropower could work on such a small scale."

Deacon nodded, his gaze steady on hers. "They've got three turbines that can generate between fifteen hundred and two thousand watts each. It's enough to keep their operations running."

She drew a slow, steadying breath, her shoulders tensing. "So, how do we get in and retrieve the device? And how do we even know it's there?" Her voice dropped, and she sighed. "You're putting your lives in danger for people you don't know."

Deacon's smile came slowly, warm and sure like the first light breaking through mist in the morning. "We do that for every mission. It's what we do. We do what others can't to protect the innocent. We're the razor-sharp edge of the sword of justice."

Echo stared at him, her chest tightening with an emotion she couldn't quite name. Another piece of her heart drifted toward this impossibly real, incredibly steady man. Sitting next to him in the heart of the Laotian jungle, surrounded by the sounds of chirping insects and rustling leaves, she felt the weight of her feelings settle in. He wasn't a dream. The aches, blisters, and bites were proof enough of that. But it could

be the fact that they were thrown together after that fantastic night of sex, too. There was so much going on, her emotions felt like they were on a seesaw, and she had no idea which way was up.

She leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder. The simple gesture felt like surrender, which terrified her. This man was becoming important—not just for her safety on the mission but in ways that made her worry. She wanted to talk to him. To see if she were insane, a borderline stalker, or maybe just wacked in the head for having thoughts like this, but with the team listening in, she chose instead to ask, “When do we go into the camp?”

“We don’t,” Deacon replied, his voice firm. “You’ll stay here. The team will go in, secure it, and bring it back to you.”

Her head snapped up, eyes narrowing as she turned to face him. “What?”

Deacon raised a hand, cutting off her protest. “Before you get on your high horse, I’d do this with any asset, not just you. If you get hurt or killed during the infil or exfil, who’s going to access the information on the device? Not any of us.”

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Echo blinked, the fight draining from her posture. She slumped back slightly, sighing. “Stop making sense.”

“Yeah, it sucks when he does that,” Ace added with a grunt of agreement, his dry tone drawing a faint smile from her.

Bandit straightened, wiping his hands on his pants. “Doctor’s orders: Stay off your feet as much as possible. I’ve padded the blisters with moleskin and covered the wounds. You’ll still be a little uncomfortable, but you’ll be able to move when you have to. Let me know if you need some painkillers.”

She shook her head firmly. “No unnecessary medications. Chemicals aren’t my thing.”

“See, Cap?” Ace said, standing up and stretching. “She fits right in here.” He nodded toward the jungle. “I’ll go relieve Rip so he can grab some food.”

“I’ll relieve you in a couple of hours,” Bandit called after him as Ace faded into the shadows. A raised hand was Ace’s only response.

Ranger approached, handing both Deacon and Echo MRE pouches. The familiar plastic crinkled in her hands as she tore it open. Settling back on the rock, she began preparing her meal alongside Deacon.

“You never answered me,” she said, her voice calm but persistent.

Deacon finished a bite of his cracker slathered in peanut butter. “About what?”

“How do we even know the device is there?” She spread her jalapeño cheese over her cracker, the processed smellsurprisingly appetizing after the long day. The first bite tasted like heaven. Hunger made even the blandest food taste good.

“Gut feeling,” Deacon said, nodding toward the camp. “No helicopters under the netting, but there are empty fuel cans. That means a chopper fueled up there recently.”

She raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. “And?”

“If you couldn’t access the device and exhausted all obvious methods, what would your next move be?”

She frowned, mulling it over. “I’d get help. Find someone with expertise or a fresh perspective.”

Deacon nodded. “With a storm system rolling in tomorrow, when would you act?”

“Now, hence the missing helicopter,” she admitted, squeezing more cheese onto her cracker. “Okay, I see your point.”

Deacon’s expression darkened slightly. “Getting in and out without being noticed is going to be a bitch.”

“You can say that again,” Ace muttered, reappearing from the shadows.

Echo glanced up at the canopy and sighed dramatically. “He’s the curmudgeon among you, isn’t he?”

Ranger choked on his food as Bandit and Deacon laughed quietly. Even Ace admitted, “Yeah, I resemble that remark.”

Echo rested her head against Deacon's shoulder again, her voice soft. "Please be careful. All of you."

No one answered, but Deacon placed a warm hand on her thigh. "We don't take unnecessary risks. No guns blazing. No high-noon cowboy stunts."

She hummed in acknowledgment, though her worry lingered. The bond she was forming with this team, especially Deacon, was more than she'd expected. More than she was prepared for.

CHAPTER 8

Deacon crouched low, his muscles coiled with tension as he studied the camp through his night vision scope. The pale green glow illuminated the guards on overwatch, perched on raised platforms that were little more than planks lashed to trees. No railings. No safety nets. Two guards kept their backs pressed to the thick tree trunks, their eyes scanning the dark jungle in lazy arcs. One sat at the edge of his platform, a faint ember glowing as he took a long drag from a hand-rolled cigarette. His posture screamed boredom, not vigilance—definitely a step down from the professionals who'd worked during the day.

Deacon's lip curled in a faint smile. Sloppy. An exploitable weakness.

Bandit and Ace had already checked in, their voices low over the comms. Rip's voice came last, his "in position" a quiet confirmation in Deacon's ear. He glanced at Ranger, who gave a single nod, his expression unreadable in the dim light. Together, they melted back into the jungle, the thick undergrowth muffling their movements as they worked their way toward the stream.

The distant sound of water grew louder as they approached the hydro-pumps hidden beneath a dense canopy of vines and moss. Deacon worked quickly, his fingers steady

despite the humid air and stream water splashing him. Disabling the pumps took less than five minutes; the machinery fell silent.

Ace's voice crackled through the comms. "Lights are out in two of the three structures, Cap. Must have batteries in the comms center."

Deacon didn't respond. A low, guttural rumble vibrated the earth beneath his feet, the storm's warning growl announcing its approach. He and Ranger retraced their steps to the camp, the oppressive air growing heavier with the storm's impending arrival.

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“Guards?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“A lot of chatter,” Bandit replied. Fluent in Laotian, his voice carried an edge of amusement. “Doesn’t seem like this is a big deal to them. They’re joking about it. The system must break down a lot. They’re still on the platforms, but it’s darker than pitch. No NVGs. They won’t see anything unless it’s moving by the comm building.”

“Copy.” Deacon’s lips barely moved as he responded. That was exactly where they needed to go.

He and Ranger slipped through the darkness, the air thick with the scent of damp earth and vegetation. The faint glow of the comms building guided them as they crept closer. Its lights flickered weakly, casting long shadows that shifted and danced in the darkness.

“Ace, are you ready?” Deacon asked, his voice low and steady.

“Few more minutes, Cap. Almost there,” Ace grunted, the strain of his work audible through the comms.

Deacon motioned to Ranger, his hand a blur in the dark. They halted just outside the building, the door slightly ajar. A faint and fleeting shadow passed across the opening. Ranger nodded once—at least one person was inside.

“Ready,” Ace panted, his voice tight.

“Push it,” Deacon ordered.

The crack of the tree snapping echoed through the jungle. Its sharpness muffled the explosive charge Ace had bored into the trunk. A thunderous crash followed, shaking the ground as the massive tree fell. Shouts erupted from the camp, sharp and chaotic, slicing through the night.

“They’re heading your way, Ace,” Deacon said, his voice calm amid the chaos.

“I’m nowhere near that tree,” Ace panted, his breath audible as he moved quickly through the underbrush.

“Overwatch?”

“They’re all looking toward the tree,” Bandit confirmed.

Deacon and Ranger moved with precision, the ground beneath them vibrating with the first roll of thunder. The air was electric and heavy, promising rain. The storm was close now, its dark clouds smothering the sky. No helicopter was on the landing pad, meaning any return flights would be delayed—likely for days, if not weeks, if the storm hit as forecasted. Another advantage to exploit.

They reached the comms building, slipping into position with practiced ease. Deacon crouched low while Ranger went high, rounding the door in a fluid motion. The entrance was empty save for a rusted gallon-sized can overflowing with cigarette butts, the acrid smell lingering in the stale air. Deacon’s fingers found the light switch, and with a flick, the building plunged into darkness.

NVGs snapped into place as they moved deeper into the building. The faint hum of electronics filled the air, and the glow of computer screens lit the room like ghostly beacons. The sudden brightness forced Deacon to lift his goggles, and he blinked as his eyes adjusted.

From somewhere deeper inside, the sharp cadence of curses reached his ears. He didn't need to speak Laotian to recognize frustration and anger. The enemy had no idea what had hit them; now, his team had the upper hand.

Deacon gave Ranger a nod, signaling him to move forward just as the person in the adjacent room started toward them. Deacon saw the exact moment the man realized he wasn't alone. He pulled his knife from its sheath and launched it directly at the man the way his Uncle Joseph had taught him to throw it years ago. The thin, sharp blade landed and sliced through the muscles and cartilage at the base of the man's neck.

Gurgling and grasping for the knife, the man fell to his knees. The look of shock and confusion faded as death overcame him. He slumped to the ground, his body twitching and moving as his brain died and his systems shut down. Ranger and he were inside the room and ready for the next contact. Deacon kept his M4 up as he bent down and pulled the knife from his target's throat. He wiped the steel on the target's clothes, then placed it back in its sheath. "No one else," Ranger said. "I've got your six, find that damn thing."

Deacon was already moving, his boots pounding against the rough flooring as he approached the array of equipment. Echo's sketch of the device flashed in his mind. She'd shown him a crude drawing, enough to give him a mental picture of what he was hunting. His eyes darted across the first cluttered counter, scanning wires, blinking lights, and metal casings. Nothing.

"Cap," Ranger hissed from his position near the doorway. "We need to move."

"I know." Deacon's reply came sharp and clipped as he pivoted to the next workstation. His patience frayed with every second wasted. "I haven't found the damn—" He froze mid-sentence, his gaze locking onto his mark. "Check that."

He slid to a halt in front of a cluttered workstation. The device was half-hidden beneath a tangle of cables. Echo had assured him the wires were unnecessary, so Deacon yanked the small metal rectangle free with several brutal jerks. He ignored the sparks that zapped and flew when the connections tore loose. Deacon shoved the device into his cargo pocket and took off.

“Let’s move.” Deacon’s voice was tight. Together, they slipped to the edge of the front door, pausing just short of the opening. He removed the device and shoved it in a plastic bag, sealing it tightly. Echo had warned them water could damage the device, so he wasn’t taking any chances. When he was done, he re-stowed the small metal rectangle and looked over at Ranger. Ranger nodded, and they took one final look out the door toward the jungle.

“Rip. Hit it,” Deacon ordered, his voice low but firm.

“Copy.” Rip’s reply came through the comms. It was only a heartbeat longer before the forest erupted with the sound of snapping wood. The sharp report of the tree was done to cover their movement.

“Bandit?” Deacon asked, scanning the edge of the jungle visible through the doorway.

“Everyone is looking the other way,” Bandit confirmed.

Deacon and Ranger didn’t hesitate. They bolted out of the building. The humid air carried the faint tang of freshly cut wood. In this case, freshly splintered wood. An excited shout from an overwatch cut through the chaos caused by the second tree falling.

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“Fuck!” Deacon barked, his legs pumping harder as they sprinted for cover. Bullets whizzed past them, shredding foliage ahead and beside them. The sharp cracks of gunfire filled the air.

“Ace!” Deacon’s shout was met with an immediate response. The sharp sound of Ace’s M4 erupted in a deadly staccato. His semi-automatic fire strafed the camp. The action of 5.56mm rounds tearing through tents and supplies bought Deacon and Ranger the time they needed. They plunged into the jungle, their boots sinking into the vegetation as the dense jungle enveloped them.

“Ace!” Deacon commanded his man to get the hell out of there by just yelling his name again.

“I’m moving!” Ace’s voice came through the comms as he moved.

“No pursuit,” Bandit said from his overwatch position. “I’ll watch for a couple more minutes just to be sure.”

Deacon and Ranger didn’t slow down. Well, not until they were out of range. When he finally did, Bandit’s muttered curse made him look back toward the camp. “What?”

“Cap ... dogs. They’ve got dogs.” Bandit’s words came in a whisper.

Deacon’s jaw tightened. Fuck. Dogs were a complication they didn’t need. His mind raced as he calculated the odds of throwing the dogs off their trail. However, the most wonderful sound of rain drumming against the canopy shifted his attention. A deluge

of rain cascaded toward them.

“Rain’s on our side,” he muttered. The torrential downpour grew heavier by the second, an enormous wall of water. “They’ll lose the scent.”

Ranger nodded. They pulled on their ponchos and pressed through the jungle. The rendezvous point was at least a mile away. If it held, their luck had just thrown them the lifeline they needed to escape the chaos behind them.

“Cap, they’re coming. Dogs and men are following you into the jungle. Get moving,” Bandit warned him.

“We’re taking the long way to the rally point. I don’t want to lead them to Echo.” Deacon pointed away from the course they’d been taking, and he and Ranger moved out.

“I’m almost back to the rendezvous point,” Rip said. “Get those guys off your ass. We’ve got her.”

Deacon didn’t bother answering. He and Ranger double-tapped their comm devices so they could hear but not be heard. He knew his team and knew they would protect Echo with their lives. The monsoon rains came with a fury. Thick sheets of rain hammered down on the jungle canopy. The deluge transformed the ground into a slick mess of mud and decaying leaves. Thunder rumbled overhead. The percussion reverberated through the dense jungle. However, Deacon could still hear the barking of dogs in the distance.

Deacon and Ranger moved with urgency, but they placed their steps with extreme precision. Their breath came in harsh gasps as they raced through the underbrush.

“Keep moving!” Deacon barked over the downpour, his voice carrying over the

storm.

Ranger, his poncho plastered to his back and mud streaking his face, nodded. Deacon scanned the terrain ahead, searching for any way to slow down their pursuers. The jungle was alive with sound—raindrops drumming on leaves, the croaks of frogs, and the distant crashes of branches and barks from the dogs as their pursuers bulldozed through the undergrowth behind them.

They kept moving and pushed through a tangle of vines. Deacon's boots slipped on the sodden ground, which crumbled under him, sending him stumbling into a shallow ravine. It was filled with fast-moving water. Ranger was right behind him. They scrambled up the bank, grabbing at vegetation to haul themselves upright.

"We can use the stream," Ranger said, his voice low and steady despite the chaos around them. "No way the dogs can follow scent in the water."

Deacon nodded, and without a moment's pause, they plunged into the rushing water. The knee-deep stream swept swiftly past, pulling at their legs as they moved downstream. Each step proved risky because the rocks underfoot were slippery and uneven. Heavy rain blurred their vision and transformed the surroundings into a misty blend of gray and green.

Behind them, the barking grew louder. The pursuers were gaining ground.

"Split up?" Ranger suggested, his jaw tight.

"No," Deacon said firmly. "Better together. We just need them to lose our scent."

Ahead, the stream forked. Ranger pointed to the right, where the water disappeared under a low, overhanging mass of vegetation. Deacon nodded. It was the best route. They ducked under the canopy, moving as silently as possible.

Time stretched, and each moment dragged as they pushed forward. Their pursuers didn't let up, though. Shouts punctuated the dogs' barks. No doubt it was the men giving orders to spread out. Deacon glanced over his shoulder, his sharp eyes narrowing. They needed to disappear—and soon.

“Up there,” Ranger hissed, nodding toward a towering tree with a thick, gnarled trunk and branches that formed a natural ladder.

They scrambled up, their fingers slipping on the rain-slick bark. At a safe height, they pressed their bodies against the trunk, barely daring to breathe. Below, the hunters passed, their flashlights sweeping through the underbrush. The dogs whined, confused by the rushing water and the lack of any trail to follow.

Minutes passed, feeling like hours. The men below argued, their voices muffled by the storm, before splitting into smaller groups to search farther downstream.

Deacon and Ranger glanced at each other. The moment the last pursuer's flashlight beam vanished, they climbed down and set off again, this time moving parallel in the stream to mask their trail further.

The jungle thickened, the undergrowth clawing at their legs. The rain showed no signs of letting up, turning trails into streams and streams into rivers. They crossed one such torrent, the water up to their waists and tugging at them with a ferocity that nearly swept them off their feet.

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“We need higher ground,” Deacon said, panting as they reached the far bank.

Ranger pointed to a faint ridge ahead, barely visible through the downpour. They clambered up, using roots and vines to pull themselves along. At the top, the jungle opened into a series of narrow paths carved by animals. They followed one that would take them back toward the rendezvous point, keeping to the shadows and listening for any sound of pursuit.

Ranger leaned against a tree, wiping water from his face. “Think we lost them?”

“For now,” Deacon said, his voice cautious. “But they’ll keep looking.”

Ranger nodded, his eyes scanning the jungle. “Then we keep moving.”

CHAPTER 9

Echo huddled under the shelter Rip, Bandit, and Ace had hurriedly constructed, supposedly for all of them, but she’d been the only one in it since it was finished. Her comm device was silent. No one had spoken a word since they’d returned. The men in the camp were pursuing Deacon and Ranger, and they were trying to lead the people from the camp away from the rendezvous point. She’d heard all that on the comms before Deacon and Ranger went silent. But that was the only thing that was silent. The rain came down harder than any storm she’d ever seen. The shelter was holding, but she had to lift the poncho once every other minute to dump the rain out so it wouldn’t collapse on top of her.

Her little perch and shelter were on top of the same rock Bandit had patched her feet

on. The same rock where Deacon had told her she wasn't going into the camp. She'd been sitting on the same rock the entire time the team was gone. She wasn't moving now, either. From under her little shelter, she could see maybe five feet in any direction before the water curtain enveloped everything else.

She dumped the water again, worried that Ranger and Deacon had been caught. Glancing at her watch, she finally broke the silence. "Has there been any word? It's been over four hours."

"Nothing," Ace said. "No news is good news."

"So you say," Echo grumbled and dumped the water again.

"Don't worry, you'll get your machine."

Ace sounded smug and condescending, and she didn't like that tone. She snorted. "Excuse me, did I say I was worried about the damn device? No, I don't think I did. Is it okay that I'm worried about Deacon and Ranger? Or should I just pretend it doesn't bother me that we haven't heard squat from them in the last four hours? Well, I can't do that, so freaking sue me. Don't be a jerk, Ace."

Click laughed, the first sound she'd heard from him in a long time.

"Yeah, don't be a jerk, Ace," Bandit added, chuckling a bit.

"Can't help myself." Ace mused. "I am who I am."

"Yeah, a jerk," Rip added.

"I concur with that." Deacon's voice over the comms made her jerk and almost slide off her perch.

“Are you okay?”

“We’re good and almost back at the rendezvous point.”

Echo closed her eyes and said a quick prayer of thanks. That horrendous pit in her stomach that ached while he’d been silent closed and filled with warmth just from hearing his voice.

Still, the script in her brain that had been playing for the last four hours continued to fill her mind.

You’re making too much of what happened. He’s a player and probably has a girl at every port.

Yeah, well, then, why did he give you his number?

So you’d be the girl in the States, like Ace has.

He’s not that type of man.

He’s a man.

Oh, shut up.

Great response. Let’s go with that.

No, he’s different. You could tell that the first moment you met him.

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Oh, you mean the moment you decided to jump his bones and he let you? Yeah, that helps your argument.

What about the way he treats me? With him, I feel special. He treats his team with respect and dignity even when they're messing around. He's different. He cares.

Does he?

Yes. He does.

She didn't know why, but she could feel it. He did.

Echo sighed, saw the bulge in the poncho, and lifted it again to dump the water out. The internal monologue started at the beginning again until she saw the shadowed forms of Deacon and Ranger come out of the rain. He walked over to her and handed her the device, secure and dry in a plastic bag. He, however, was soaked to the skin, and his face was scratched, bloody, and splattered with mud.

"What happened to you?" she asked as she took the bag.

"The jungle. Get that information to Click. Do you need help?"

She shook her head, lifted the poncho, and dumped the water. Deacon frowned and walked over to a nearby patch of saplings. He took out his knife, cut one, and then returned to where she was. He lodged the sapling between the rock and the poncho, creating a continuously tented roof.

“Thanks.”

“I’m going to speak with the guys. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay. I’m good here. No worries.” She pulled the metal out of the bag and went to work. She pulled a small screwdriver out of her pocket and unfastened the screws that held the casing on. Once she slid that off, what looked like microcircuitry was on three sides. Using her thumb, she moved a silver chip and depressed underneath it, unlatching the side. After carefully sliding the fake board out of the way, she lifted the device to her eye and pushed the red button. A scan of her retina was initiated and then, after a pause, initiated again, validating both eyes, not just one.

The device cleared, and a small screen flickered to life. “Click, you ready?”

“You’re being recorded. Send it as fast as you like,” Click answered.

Echo read the information, carefully enunciating the latitude and longitude numbers and other information stored in each file. A horrendous roar from the direction Deacon had come from startled her. She spoke faster and louder. There were only three more entries.

“Echo ...” That was Deacon.

She didn’t stop. She had two more lines.

“Echo, we’ve got to go. Get off the rock! Come this way!” Deacon yelled, and it sounded like he was running.

“One more line.” She started the last line and yelled it to Click to hear herself over the roar.

“Echo!” Deacon shouted from somewhere behind her. She wouldn’t have heard the concern in his voice if not for the comm device in her ear.

Echo’s voice trembled as she recited the last string of numbers, her eyes darting from the device in her hand. The rush of the water around her was deafening, a blast of chaos that made every word less important. The water around the boulder she was on was rising. She glanced up, her breath hitching as a deep rumble reverberated through the clearing.

The wall of water came out of the veil of rain and hit without warning, crashing over the rock she clung to. It slammed into her, wrenching the device from her grasp and spinning it through the air.

“No!” she screamed, but the word was torn from her mouth and swallowed by the roar of the floodwater.

She reached out blindly, her fingers scrabbling against slick stone, but there was nothing to hold onto. The water dragged her under, a violent power that spun her like a doll. Water pummeled her from all sides, savage and merciless.

Her lungs burned as she fought for control, kicking and thrashing in the churning depths. Her foot struck something solid—a jagged rock—and lodged there. For one fleeting moment, it stopped her tumbling plunge. Relief was short-lived. The current roared around her, pressing her deeper, pinning her beneath its relentless flow.

She struggled, twisting and pulling at her trapped foot, but the rock held fast. The water’s grip stole her strength, numbing her limbs as her chest screamed for air. She clawed at the ground. Her nails scraped uselessly against stone and silt—there was no escape.

Panic clawed its way up her throat. Her lungs convulsed, her body demanding oxygen

she couldn't provide. The pressure built, a vise tightening around her rib cage until, finally, it broke. Her instincts overrode her will, and she gasped—water flooding into her mouth and down into her lungs.

The pain was immediate, burning like fire as her chest heaved uncontrollably. Her mind screamed against the suffocating invasion. Her body betrayed her, pulling in more water with every desperate attempt to breathe. She jerked, her movements slowing as her strength ebbed away.

God, is this how I die? The thought came unbidden, cold, and final, cutting through the chaos around her. Echo forced her eyes open, the murky water swirling in shades of green and brown. Her vision blurred as the current whipped her hair around her face like a shroud. She tried to focus, searching for light, for something, anything—but all she saw was darkness closing in.

The tightness in her chest gave way to a numb, eerie calm. Her limbs felt heavy and distant. The world around her dimmed, the water's roar fading into a dull hum. She felt herself slipping, her consciousness leaving.

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The pain peaked, sharp and excruciating, and then it was gone.

A strange peace took her, wrapping her in its embrace as the edges of her vision dissolved into blackness. Her final thought lingered like a whisper, soft and bittersweet: I'm not ready.

Deacon watched in horror as the surging wall of water struck the rock Echo had been perched on, sweeping her away as if she weighed nothing. His heart lurched in his chest, and his mind screamed her name. Without hesitation, he launched down the ravine, his boots skidding over loose vegetation and his pulse pounding in his ears. The flash flood had transformed their small clearing into churning chaos, and the roaring of the water drowned out nearly all sound.

For one agonizing moment, she vanished beneath the foaming surface. His breath caught. Then he saw her hand clawing for a hold about fifteen feet ahead.

"Fuck!" The curse erupted from his throat as he pushed himself harder, legs burning with effort.

"Cap! Ten feet farther!" Ace's voice came through the comms. He'd spotted her from his elevated overwatch position.

Deacon didn't slow, didn't even respond. Ranger and Bandit flanked the other side of the raging current. Every step felt like an eternity. He scanned the rushing water, praying for another sign of her. Please. God, please.

An explosion tore through the air, the force reverberating in his chest. "Diverting the

water!” Rip’s shout echoed across the comms, followed by the rumble of shifting rock upstream. The flood began to slow, its ferocity easing but not fast enough.

“Anyone see her?” Deacon yelled, his voice hoarse, desperate.

“There!” His eyes locked onto a flash of red—a hair tie, spinning in the current before it floated past him. Past him?

“Shit, Cap! Go back!” Ace’s voice cracked with urgency. “I can see her hair—she’s underwater!”

Deacon pivoted without hesitation, his feet splashing into the water as he surged upstream. His eyes locked on the faint gleam of her hair, barely visible beneath the surface. Without a second thought, he dove in. Ranger hit the water at the same moment from the opposite bank.

The current tugged at him, but he forced his way forward, his arms slicing through the water. Don’t stop. Don’t stop. When he reached her, he froze. Her eyes were open but lifeless, her foot pinned beneath a jagged boulder. No. No, no, no. This isn’t happening.

He surfaced. “Ranger, she’s pinned!” Deacon shouted, his voice raw with panic. Together, they dove, braced against the current, and strained against the rock that trapped her foot. The weight was immense, and the water fought to drag them both down. Deacon’s lungs burned, but he shoved harder, his muscles screaming in protest. Finally, with a sickening scrape, the boulder shifted, freeing her.

Deacon yanked her to the surface, her limp body heavy in his arms. He fought the current, his vision narrowing as he focused on Bandit waiting at the bank. Ranger was at his side, helping steady them as they pushed toward safety. When they reached the edge, Bandit and Ranger helped him to haul her onto the muddy ground, their

movements precise and practiced despite the storm raging around them. Dear God, please ...

“She’s not breathing!” Bandit’s shout cut through Deacon’s haze. “Clear her airway—now!”

Deacon dropped to his knees beside her, his hands trembling as he tilted her head back. Pinching her nose, he delivered two sharp breaths, his lips barely brushing hers. “Come on, Echo. Come on.”

Bandit’s hands moved to her chest, compressing with ruthless efficiency. “Stay with us, dammit,” he growled, his focus unshakable.

Deacon hovered, his gaze locked on her pale face. The rain pelted down, cold and unrelenting, but he didn’t notice. “Don’t you dare give up,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “Fight, Echo. Fight.”

Her body convulsed suddenly, a wet, gasping cough tearing free as water spewed from her lips. Deacon twisted her head to the side, his heart leaping as she retched and choked. Bandit didn’t pause, moving to stabilize her as her breathing hitched unevenly.

Deacon sat back, his body trembling from exertion and sheer relief. For a moment, the world blurred, his vision clouded by tears he hadn’t felt in years—not since his sister had been found, battered but alive. He swiped at his face, pretending it was the rain. No one was watching him anyway. All eyes were on Echo, her chest rising and falling in shallow, ragged breaths as Bandit continued to work.

Ace and Rip appeared beside them, their faces grim but determined, as Bandit continued working with Echo. Every moment stretched, each shallow rise and fall of her chest an agonizing reminder of how close they’d come to losing her. And then it

came—the sound that shattered the tension like a lightning strike.

Echo cried.

The small, broken sound was the most beautiful thing Deacon had ever heard. A strangled sob escaped him as he held her hand. His own hand trembled. He didn't care if his tears mingled with the rain cascading down his face. "It's okay, babe. It's okay," he whispered, his voice hoarse with emotion.

She reached for him, her fingers clinging weakly to his arm. He bent closer, wrapping himself around her as much as he could while Bandit worked. Her shivering was almost imperceptible but unmistakable against his skin.

"She doesn't have a distended stomach," Bandit muttered, his tone shifting into diagnostic mode. His steady professionalism was a lifeline. "Okay, sweetie, what's your name?"

Echo's body jerked as another coughing fit wracked her. When it subsided, she managed to rasp, "Echo." Her voice was raw, barely audible over the rain, but it was there.

Bandit nodded, his expression softening a fraction. "Good. That's good. Where are you?"

Deacon's stomach clenched when she responded, barely above a whisper, "I don't know."

Bandit's gaze darted up to meet his. Worry etched in his features. "Cap, we need to get her out of this weather ASAP. She wasn't without oxygen for long, but she's at risk for complications—pneumonia and pulmonary issues. She needs chest X-rays and observation."

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“There’s a village not far away. About ten miles east.” Click’s voice cut in through the comms. “I’m already working on an exit strategy. Let her know the information she recovered has been sent out.”

Deacon tightened his hold on Echo, pulling her closer to shield her from the relentless rain. She shivered against him, her frailty a knife to his chest. “Did you hear that?” he murmured, his lips close to her ear. “The information on the device—it’s been delivered. You did it.”

She coughed weakly, her face pressing against his chest. “I’m cold,” she murmured, her words barely audible.

“I know,” he replied, his voice thick. “We’re getting you out of here. Just hang on.”

Ace jumped, his rifle lifting into his shoulder in a fluid motion. The crack of a distant branch snapping echoed through the torrential downpour, lightning illuminating the drenched jungle in brief flashes. Ace’s movement activated the entire team. They moved without thought. Deacon, Ranger, Bandit, and Rip spun in unison, weapons raised to shoulder level, eyes scanning the dense foliage for threats. The rain lashed at them, soaking their gear and making visibility nearly impossible.

“Ace, move forward!” Deacon barked, his voice cutting through the storm like a whip.

Ace advanced, his boots squelching in the mud. “Stop where you are!” Ace yelled, his tone sharp and commanding.

Bandit echoed the command in Laotian, his voice steady despite the chaos. The rain fell in relentless sheets, hammering the leaves and creating streams of water that snaked through the uneven ground. Deacon's sharp gaze caught movement—a shadow separating itself from the trees.

The figure emerged through the rain. The man was soaked to the bone, his clothes clinging to his wiry frame. Slowly, palms out, he raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. Lightning struck again, briefly illuminating his face. He looked gaunt but determined, his expression unreadable beneath the curtain of water streaming down his face.

“You shouldn't be down here,” the man called out in English, his words laced with a faint British accent. “You're going to be swept away. The flood waters are coming fast.”

Deacon hesitated for a fraction of a second, his training warring with the instincts screaming at him to lower his weapon. Finally, he nodded, lowering his rifle slightly, though the others maintained their aim. “Who are you?” he demanded, his voice firm.

The man took another cautious step forward, water splashing around his ankles. “My name is Father Ralph Clarkson. I've been in this country for almost twelve years. I'm with a mission group.” He eyed them carefully. “What are you doing here?”

Deacon swiped rain from his face with a gloved hand, the leather slick against his skin. “We're trying to get out,” he said bluntly. “One of us is injured. Do you know of a safe place for us to stay?”

Ralph pushed his wet hair out of his eyes, his features etched with concern. “We have room, but we need to move—and move now. The water is rising, and it'll sweep through here like a freight train.”

Deacon turned to Bandit. “Can she move?”

Bandit sighed. “She’ll have to be carried.”

Deacon’s jaw tightened as he turned to Ranger. “Find two poles we can use.”

Ralph pointed to the east, his hand trembling slightly. “There’s a bamboo grove over there.”

Ranger nodded, yanking his machete from his pack in one swift motion. Deacon glanced at Rip, who silently fell into step behind him, their movements taking them out of view in moments. In the chaos of the storm, the team’s coordination was like clockwork, each member instinctively knowing their role.

Bandit crouched beside Echo, who lay still beneath the poncho. He quickly pulled another from his pack, ready to thread it through the bamboo to create a makeshift stretcher. Deacon joined him and rummaged through his pack for his extraponcho, their hands moving quickly yet steadily despite the slippery conditions.

Ralph stepped closer, his expression darkening as he surveyed the scene. “People who don’t understand this country—and its dangers—shouldn’t be here,” he said, his tone accusatory.

Deacon’s laugh was sharp and bitter. “And people who don’t know what they’re talking about shouldn’t make assumptions.” He met Ralph’s gaze, his own cold and unyielding. He didn’t owe this man an explanation.

Ralph crossed his arms, the rain plastering his shirt to his chest. “Are you mercenaries?” Bandit snorted a laugh, but Ralph’s eyes shifted to Echo. His expression softened as he took in her pale face, half-covered by the poncho. “What happened to her?”

Deacon glanced at Bandit, who waited for his approval before answering. “She drowned. We brought her back. There was a flash flood—one of our team diverted the water, and we managed to pull her out.”

Ralph’s brows shot up. “Diverted with an explosion? I thought I heard one. That’s why I came down this far. I was hoping a plane or helicopter hadn’t crashed.”

Deacon gave a curt nod, refocusing on his team as Ranger and Rip returned with two long bamboo poles. The mud clung to their boots with every step, the sound nearly drowned out by the roaring storm. Bandit and Deacon worked swiftly, threading the ponchos through the poles to form a stretcher. Ralph lingered nearby, his concern shifting to frustration. “What guarantee do I have that you won’t harm me or the people I’m with?”

Deacon’s eyes narrowed. “The only thing I can give you is my word. We’re here for a mission. It’s done. We’re waiting for extraction. We won’t bring trouble to your camp.”

Ralph studied him for a long moment, the tension between them palpable. Finally, he nodded. “Follow me.”

The trek through the jungle was brutal. The rain had turned the trail into a muddy mess, each step a battle against the drenched earth. Tree roots jutted from the ground like jagged teeth, threatening to trip them at every turn. Ranger slipped, landing hard on a rock that tore his knee open. He swore under his breath but pushed forward without hesitation. Deacon’s hands burned as blisters formed on his palms; the wet leather did little to stop the friction, yet his grip on the bamboo poles never faltered.

Ace and Rip alternated between point and rear guard, their eyes constantly scanning the dense underbrush for threats. The jungle was deadly. The sound of rain blending with the rustle of leaves and the distant roar of the swollen flood water testified to its

brutality.

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Echo laid beneath the makeshift tent, her shallow breaths visible only when the poncho fluttered with movement. Deacon glanced down at her, the weight of what could have been hitting him like a punch to the gut. The thought of losing her was a possibility he couldn't entertain.

As they climbed higher, the jungle opened to reveal a small clearing that had a village of thatched huts standing silhouetted against the stormy sky. People emerged cautiously, their faces wary but not unkind.

One elderly man stepped forward, his frame hunched but his eyes sharp. "We have room. You are welcome," he said in broken English. "Me know American long time."

Bandit spoke in Laotian, and the man's face lit up in recognition. After a brief exchange, Bandit turned to Deacon. "Cap, this hut is for you and Echo. The larger one is for the rest of us. I'll come by to check her out once you're settled."

Deacon nodded, and he and Ranger carried Echo into the smaller hut. The structure was simple but sturdy, made of thatched grasses and leaves. The sound of rain pounding on the roof was a constant reminder of the storm raging outside. But it was dry, which was a Godsend.

As Deacon laid Echo down and adjusted the poncho over her, he allowed himself a moment to breathe. The storm wasn't over—not by a long shot—but for now, they had shelter.

The trip up the mountain was one Echo would never forget. She'd been in cold climates before. She'd grown up in Montana and knew subzero weather, but nothing had prepared her for the relentless, bone-deep chill she endured now. The rain was merciless, battering the stretcher as if the sky itself was determined to keep her pinned to the earth. Every drop felt like shards of ice slicing through her skin, seeping into her core. The jungle around her was alive with chaos, the sound of the downpour mixing with the rush of swollen streams and the distant roar of the flood water carving its way through the valley below.

Her chest and ribs screamed with every shallow breath, the aftermath of CPR leaving her bruised and tender. She could feel each point of her rescuers' efforts like a knife pressing into her body. Every sharp movement of the stretcher, every slip of the men carrying her, sent bolts of pain lancing through her body like lightning. Her gasps were sharp and unbidden, triggering fresh waves of agony through her battered lungs that left her trembling. She hated being helpless, hated being a burden when the team was already fighting the unforgiving terrain to keep her alive.

Bandit's presence by her side was a constant and a comfort. "How's she doing?" Deacon called out. His tone was clipped but calm. Bandit would crouch beside her to check her pulse or press a hand against her forehead. Each time, he found her shivering uncontrollably.

Bandit muttered under his breath as he adjusted the poncho over her. "Cold, but hanging in there," was his usual answer.

Echo's thoughts, however, weren't focused on the jungle or how cold she felt. Instead, they were tangled in something much more internal and mystifying. She'd drowned.

The saying that there was nothing after death but darkness was wrong. Or at least, she thought it was. She'd seen her aunt who'd been gone for over five years. The memory

burned bright in her mind: the warmth, the light, the overwhelming sense of calm. Her aunt's hug had been a sanctuary, and her smile had been bittersweet when she'd held Echo at arm's length.

"You can't stay here, sweetheart. You can't stay," her aunt had said, her voice soft and firm.

"What do you mean?" Echo had asked, confusion and disbelief swirling through her. "Why can't I stay with you?"

Her aunt's smile had deepened, sadness pooling in her eyes. "One day, we'll hug again. But Deacon needs you now."

The words had echoed through her like a distant drumbeat. "What?" she'd whispered, the warmth around her faltering. A chill had slipped through her, and her aunt had seemed to move away without either of them walking.

Her aunt's gaze had locked with hers, full of quiet insistence. "Deacon needs you now."

And then, her body had exploded with pain. The warmth and light had been ripped away, replaced by the icy grip of reality. Her lungs had burned as water surged from her chest, her body writhing as she gasped for air. The cold had been suffocating, the kind of cold that burrowed into her bones and refused to let go.

She'd clung to the hand beside her, her vision blurry, and found Deacon there. His face had been a mixture of relief and fierce determination and his voice low and steady as he coaxed her back to him. Bandit's questions had been sharp and steady, and she'd answered as best she could, her mind struggling to separate the surreal from reality.

Had she really seen her aunt?

It had felt so real. The peace, warmth, and overwhelming contentment was unlike anything she'd ever known. She hadn't wanted to leave. But now, there she was, shivering violently, her body wracked with nausea and pain. She clamped her mouth shut, grinding her teeth against the bile rising in her throat. The men were risking everything to save her. She wouldn't make their task harder.

The jungle was relentless. She could tell the trail was a slick, treacherous mess, the mud thick and cloying, sucking at the men's boots with every step. The sounds proved those facts. The dense canopy above offered no protection from the downpour. She peeked out of the poncho and watched the water cascade from leaves, turning the ground into a quagmire. Roots jutted out like forgotten fur traps, and vines tangled around everything. The air was heavy with the scent of wet earth and rotting vegetation. She should have been hot from the humidity and the sweltering temperatures, but she still shivered.

Deacon's voice cut through the storm. "Keep moving! Watch your footing!" His tone was sharp, a reminder to his team to stay vigilant.

Ace and Rip alternated between point and rear guard, their movements precise despite the slippery terrain. Deacon's orders would change their position at regular intervals. She assumed it was to keep the person on point sharp and give him a rest after being so attentive for so long. Ranger had slipped at one point, landing hard on a sharp rock that gashed his knee. She wouldn't have known he was injured if he hadn't sworn under his breath and bluntly answered Bandit's questions. She could imagine Bandit's hand gestures to the other man. A smile formed on her lips. This team moved like a single organism, their coordination a testament to their training and trust in one another.

Echo's stretcher jolted as they navigated the steep incline, and she bit back a cry, the

pain in her chest, or rather ribs, sharp and unforgiving. She wanted to tell them to stop, to let her rest, but the urgency in their movements told her everything she needed to know. The storm wasn't letting up, and the rising water was a threat they couldn't ignore.

When they finally reached the small shelter, Deacon pulled the ponchos off her with practiced care. The structure was crude but sturdy, made of woven grasses and bamboo. The sound of the rain on the thatched roof was a constant reminder of the storm raging outside.

Deacon kneeled beside her, his face still tight with worry. "I'm going to find you some dry clothes. Most of what we have is soaked."

Echo's fingers brushed his arm, her voice hoarse. "There's a fireplace. Start a fire. We can dry our clothes."

Deacon glanced at the stacked wood and nodded. "Let me get it started, and then I'll help you out of those wet clothes."

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As the fire crackled to life, the warmth was an almost painful contrast to the cold that had gripped her for so long. Deacon helped her shed her drenched clothing, wrapping her in a thick woolen blanket that was at the foot of the sleeping pallet at the side of the room. He helped her to a chair by the fire. Her legs trembled as she moved, but the heat began to seep into her, chasing away the chill.

“I’ll get some food for you,” Deacon said, his voice softer now. “You need to eat.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. I’m too nauseous.”

His brow furrowed. “What about something to drink? Tea? Hot cocoa? I can get either from the MREs.”

She managed a faint smile. “I’ll try.”

With a nod, he stood, his presence a reassuring anchor in the storm. As he stepped out to retrieve supplies, Echo closed her eyes, letting the warmth of the fire wrap around her like a second skin. Her thoughts drifted back to her aunt, to the peace she’d felt in that otherworldly light.

There was a reason she’d been pulled back.

When she opened her eyes to the sight of Deacon returning, his steady presence filling the small shelter, she knew without a doubt he was the reason.

Bandit followed him in, and she watched as Deacon went back out. Bandit removed his poncho, but he was soaked to the core as they all were. His boots squelched as he

walked over to her.

“Let’s get you moved to the pallet so I can do an exam out of the elements,” Bandit said, offering her a hand.

“Can I just lie down here?” she asked. Leaving the fire wasn’t an option. She needed the warmth.

“Sure. Let me move it over here.” When he’d finished moving the sleeping pallet near the fire, he helped her lie down on the floor. Her body ached in ways she hadn’t imagined possible. The heat from the flames penetrated the deep chill that had settled in her bones.

“Cap is off to get you something warm to drink. Just don’t chug anything,” Bandit said as he took a stethoscope out of his medical bag. Exhausted, she tilted her head to look up at Bandit. “No offense, but I don’t think I’m gonna chug anything for a very long time.”

Bandit raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching before he let out a hearty laugh. The sound was warm and grounding, cutting through the tension in the small hut. “Well, that’s a good sign, at least. Your humor is back.”

Echo coughed, her breath hitching as pain flared in her chest. She groaned, clutching her chest. “What did you do? Break every rib in my body?”

Bandit made a face, his expression halfway between guilt and pragmatism. “Well, you know you have to depress pretty damn hard for CPR. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had broken ribs and bruising, at the very least. Let me look at you, and we’ll do our best to make you more comfortable.”

“We?” She frowned and looked back to the door.

Bandit snorted. “In the royal sense. It’s me. Only me.”

She nodded weakly, allowing him to examine her. He worked quietly, carefully shifting the blanket just enough to place the cold disc of his stethoscope against her chest. Echo winced but didn’t complain, the sound of her own shallow breaths filling the space.

“Your lungs sound good,” Bandit said, his tone steady but cautious. “But we need to be very careful. I have some antibiotics I’m going to give you. Just a precaution at this point, but I’d rather do everything I can rather than wish I’d done something when it’s too late. Of course, this isn’t the ideal course of action. You need an X-ray to rule out anything serious—fluid in your lungs, fractures, internal injuries. Honestly, I’d rather have you in a hospital.”

Echo coughed again, her body trembling with the effort. She groaned softly, her voice raspy. “No offense, but I’d rather be in a hospital, too. But we play the hand we’re dealt, right?”

Bandit gave a low grunt of agreement. He grabbed a rolled-up pillow and gently placed it under her head, his touch surprisingly tender for someone so big and dangerous. “I’m just an EMT, not a doctor. But I think you’re gonna be okay. If you start to run a fever or feel worse in any way, you need to let me know immediately.”

She nodded, her words barely above a whisper. “I have a violent headache.”

He shook his head knowingly. “No doubt you do. I’ll get you some over-the-counter pain relievers. The real question is whether you can keep them down.”

She nodded again, though her stomach twisted violently in protest. The nausea was relentless, rising and falling in waves that left her on the edge of losing control.

A knock at the door drew Bandit's attention. A small woman entered the hut, carrying a tray balanced carefully in her hands. She spoke in Laotian, her words quick and soft. Bandit spoke, his tone calm and respectful. The woman set the tray down on a small table before retreating silently, the door creaking as it closed behind her.

Bandit turned back to Echo. "It seems the villagers have provided some food. She says if you need clothes or anything else, let them know. But judging by her size, I'm guessing the clothes would be pretty small."

He walked over to the tray, a rare smile crossing his face as he examined its contents. "This is perfect. Bread, cheese, and milk. Let's get you sitting up and see if you can tolerate a small amount."

Echo grimaced as she propped herself up with his help, the effort draining what little energy she had left. She took a small corner of bread, chewing slowly as Bandit watched her with a critical eye.

By the time she'd swallowed the tiny piece of bread, Deacon entered the hut carrying a few items. Bandit walked over to him, lowering his voice as they spoke. Echo couldn't hear what was said, but she didn't care. A flicker of relief settled in her chest. Deacon was back. She had medicine for her head and body aches, and she was starting to get warm.

She was going to live.

The thought brought a strange blend of gratitude and determination. There was a reason for her presence here. If she were to believe her experience in the afterlife, that reason was Deacon. Or perhaps it was her mind's desperate effort to make sense of what had transpired. Either way, she'd been granted a second chance, and she wasn't going to waste it.

CHAPTER 11

Deacon stepped into the larger shelter, shaking the rain from his poncho. The fire's soft glow reflected off the wet ground, casting flickering shadows that seemed to dance with the storm. The rain outside was deafening, a constant roar against the thatched roof, and the air inside the shelter was heavy with the earthy scent of damp wood and mud.

Bandit had just finished patching up Ranger's leg. The gash on his knee looked raw, and the stitches glimmered faintly in the firelight. It would be sore for weeks, but Ranger didn't flinch. The kid—no, the man—was tougher than most operatives Deacon had worked with. He'd proven that repeatedly.

Deacon motioned to Bandit. "Let's go check on Echo."

Bandit wiped his hands clean on a rag before donning his soaked poncho and following him across the clearing. The rain pounded the jungle, the relentless torrent turning the ground into a mess of sucking mud. Each step was a battle to keep their footing. The sound of rushing water from the flooding below filled the air. The trail

between the shelters was barely visible, and vines hung low, dripping water like thin ropes.

They reached the smaller shelter, its walls trembling slightly in the wind. Deacon opened the door and peeked inside. The fire burned low but steady, casting warm light on Echo, who was huddled in a blanket near the flames. Her pale face was tinged with a flush of warmth, but her exhaustion was still evident. Satisfied she was covered, he let Bandit in and closed the door against the storm.

Deacon turned and trudged back to the larger shelter. Outside, Ranger, Ace, and Rip were securing the perimeter, their movements methodical despite the downpour. Rip was near the tree line, his rifle at the ready as he scanned the dark jungle. Ace was reinforcing a makeshift barricade of fallen branches, his scowl deepening every time the mud sucked at his boots. Despite his injured leg, Ranger stood watch near the edge of the village, his stance firm even as the rain plastered his hair to his head. They worked silently, communicating with hand signals and glances—a team honed by experience and trust.

No one believed they'd been followed, but no one was willing to take the chance either. The jungle was a natural eraser, and the rain obliterated any tracks they might have left. However, it also made visibility nearly impossible, and every rustle of the leaves sounded like a potential threat.

Deacon stepped inside the shelter, shaking water from his poncho as he activated his comm device. "Click, do you have our location?"

"Roger that," came Click's familiar voice, steady despite the storm's interference. "I've been listening—it sounded like one hell of a journey."

"You could say that," Deacon muttered, glancing at the fire. The heat barely penetrated the dampness in the air. "Do we have anything on an extraction point?"

“We can get a helicopter in low,” Click said, his tone hesitant. “But you’ll have to wait until the water recedes. And, Cap, the worst part of the storm hasn’t hit you yet.”

Deacon ran a hand through his wet hair, letting out a breath. “You mean it gets worse?”

“It just keeps coming, Cap. Speaking of which, your brother has called several times. He wants me to patch him through ASAP. Do you have time?”

“I’ll make time. Set it to confidential.”

“I always do when you talk to him,” Click replied with a faint chuckle. “Hold on. I’ll get him.”

Deacon sat in a small, handmade chair that creaked beneath his weight. He stared into the fire built by one of his team, watching the flames dance and flicker. It was a miracle that the villagers had taken them in. The storm had turned the jungle into a death trap, and without shelter, they would’ve been in serious trouble. Maybe it was luck. Maybe it was divine intervention. Who the hell knew?

Ronan’s voice cut his thoughts, sharp and laced with concern. “What the fuck is happening?”

“It’s raining,” Deacon replied with a wry laugh. “And when I say raining, I mean all hell has busted loose. The river’s flooded out of its banks, there’s flash flooding, and it’s a mess here.”

“No kidding. The meteorologists are calling it the storm of the century,” Ronan said. “That phrase gets thrown around a lot, but from what I’m seeing, it might actually be true.”

“We’re not going anywhere soon, are we?” Deacon asked.

“No,” Ronan admitted. “We’ve analyzed every angle of retrieval, and there’s no safe option right now.”

Deacon leaned back, the chair groaning under him. “I think I know how Fleur feels.”

There was a pause. “What are you talking about?” Ronan finally asked.

“About emotions hitting quick and hard—and not knowing if they’ll last.”

“Okay, fill me in, D. What’s going on?”

Deacon sighed, glancing at the door as the rain hammered down outside. “Long story short: I met a woman before this mission. We hooked up, not knowing who we were to each other. Turned out, she’s my principal and a CIA officer. She’s amazing, smart, capable—and today, for a moment, she was dead.”

Ronan’s voice sharpened. “Explain.”

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“She got caught in a flash flood and pulled underwater. When we found her, she wasn’t breathing. We did CPR and brought her back, but for a few minutes ...” Deacon paused, his voice tightening. “She was gone.”

Ronan let out a long breath. “And now?”

“She’s okay. We carried her up the mountain to this village, but, man, it hit me like a ton of bricks. This woman ... she’s something else. She’s touched something inside me I didn’t even know was there.”

Ronan said softly. “It sounds like you’ve found someone worth fighting for.”

Deacon rubbed his face, the firelight casting deep shadows across the room. “Maybe. It’s too early to know for sure, but I’m not willing to let go. When I thought I’d lost her, it felt like losing a piece of myself. The night we had together was amazing,” Deacon said, his voice low and thoughtful. The memory of her laugh, her sharp wit, and how she’d looked at him lingered like a warm fire in his mind. “She told me she was from Virginia, and before I knew she was my CIA contact, I’d already decided I wanted to get to know her. We’ve been together twenty-four hours a day for a while now. She fits this team. She knows my people. She knows my job.”

“Does she know who you are?” Ronan asked, his tone sharp with curiosity.

Deacon snorted. “Hell, no. She knows I’m Deacon Alexander, and that’s it. I don’t know what you did for Fleur regarding nondisclosure agreements, but I’m not telling anybody my realidentity without talking to Mom and Dad first—as Gabby did. I don’t think I’ll handle it like Charley did, but then again, Charley’s unique.”

“Charley is weirdly lovable, and we all know it. I still haven’t told Fleur everything,” Ronan admitted after a pause. His voice softened, the weight of his words evident. “She’s it for me, man, but she has to realize that for herself before I ask her to sign an NDA and tell her the whole truth.”

Deacon rubbed his face, the motion slow and weary. The constant roar of the rain outside and the oppressive humidity in the shelter pressed down on him like a physical weight. “Don’t you think that will put a wedge between you?”

“No, I don’t think it will,” Ronan replied firmly. “I love her. She loves me. She’s afraid I don’t know my mind, which is ironic as hell when she’s the one debating this connection, not me. But as soon as she works through everything in her head, I’m gonna marry her. Are you telling me you have feelings for this CIA officer?”

Deacon let out a short, humorless laugh. “Feelings? Yeah, I got all the fucking feels. Especially when she was caught in a flash flood, pulled underwater, and died.” He stopped, the words hanging in the air like a weight, before continuing. “I don’t know how she has affected me as much as she has. I was all business in the moment, but, man, I was freaking out while going through the emotions. I’ve never had that happen before. Don’t get me wrong—I mean, she was underwater. Her eyes were open. She was dead. We did CPR, and she came back to life. Then we carried her up the mountain to this village. Halfway up that damn rock is when everything fucking hit me. Like a boulder—aRaiders of the Lost Ark-sized fucking boulder. This woman touched something inside me I didn’t even know existed. Fuck, that sounds stupid, doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t sound stupid,” Ronan replied, his voice firm and calm. “It sounds like you found somebody who you could have a life with. What’s the one thing that attracts you the most to this woman?”

Deacon leaned back against the creaking chair, staring at the flickering firelight as he

thought. “Well, besides the fact that she’s absolutely beautiful—at least to me—she has a massive personality that I jive with. I mean, like, immediately we connected. There was no awkwardness, no feeling each other out—we just clicked. She can stand up against Ace and all of his grumpy bullshit. She walked for miles with blisters on top of blisters without a single complaint.”

“So, stubborn like you. That’s good.” Ronan laughed.

“Right? But she’s more than that. She’s super intelligent ... Hell, man, there isn’t justonething. Echo is the whole nine yards.”

Ronan chuckled, a warm, knowing sound. “Cool name. If I didn’t know better, I’d think the love bug has bitten you.”

“Love?” Deacon snorted, shaking his head. “It’s way too early for love—hence me saying I know what Fleur’s talking about. But there’s something there, dude. There’s something there, and I’m not willing to let it go. When I thought I’d lost her, I was devastated—not only because she’s my charge during this mission but because of that connection.”

“Then don’t ever let her go,” Ronan said simply.

“I have zero plans of that happening,” Deacon replied, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. “Now, do me a favor and figure out how to get us the fuck out of this water barrel.”

Ronan groaned loudly. “If I have to build an ark and float it there to get you, I will. But if you’re safe, we’re not gonna put anybody at risk. You’ll have to wait. According to the weathermaps, it looks like about two to three weeks. One front after another is rolling in.”

“Two to three weeks? We can do that. Unless Echo develops complications from what happened today. If that happens, I don’t fucking care what the Laotian or American government says. Come and get us.”

“That’s guaranteed,” Ronan said firmly. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“For as long as it takes,” Deacon replied, his voice leaving no room for argument. “I need to get back to Echo.”

“Copy. Take care of yourself, and I’ll stay in touch with Click,” Ronan replied before the line went quiet.

Deacon shifted his attention back to his surroundings. The storm outside was relentless. The distant flooding water was a roaring monster, swelling beyond its banks. It swallowed trees and debris in its path. Each flash of lightning illuminated the jungle. Their newest fight was the tangle of vines, the dripping foliage, and the relentless mud that clung to everything.

Standing, he grabbed his pack from the pile of soaked equipment, and when he unzipped it, the damp fabric clinging to his fingers, he discovered a small bag with a pair of dry socks tucked inside. A rare stroke of luck. Thank God. Echo’s lips had been nearly blue earlier, her skin cold. Even in the suffocating humidity of the jungle, she’d been freezing—a troubling sign. Bandit had explained it was a result of the shock from her experience, but it still gnawed at Deacon.

He grabbed a couple of MREs and slipped on his poncho, tucking the supplies under it to keep them dry. When he stepped outside, the rain pelted him, and the storm fought to push him sideways. The jungle seemed to close in. The sound of the stormwater rushing added to the leaves thrashing and the distant rumble of thunder to make one hell of a racket.

His team was out there, working silently and efficiently. They moved like shadows in the storm, their coordination seamless as they checked the perimeter and secured the area. The rain might have wiped away any tracks, but vigilance was a habit none of them would ever break.

Deacon pushed through the muck, the firelight from the smaller shelter glowing like a beacon in the chaos. His steps were deliberate, his focus sharp. He was going back to Echo, back to the woman who'd turned his world upside down in ways he hadn't seen coming.

Deacon spoke with Bandit as he stepped into the smaller shelter. The rain outside pounded against the thatched roof. The humid air inside was thick, laced with the scent of damp wood smoke from the burning fire. Bandit stood near the door. His face shadowed, his tone calm but firm as he relayed his instructions.

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“She’s doing well,” Bandit said, his voice steady. “Keep an eye on her. Make sure she keeps her food down and takes in liquids slowly. Call me immediately if she spikes a fever or anything seems off.” His sharp gaze locked on Deacon. “She needs to follow my instructions to the letter. No exceptions.”

Deacon nodded, determination tightening his resolve. He shrugged off his poncho, the soaked material slapping against the floor, then crossed the small space to Echo. Her fragile appearance stirred something deep in his chest. The fire’s flickering flames illuminated her pale skin and tired eyes, but there was a spark of life in her gaze as he approached.

He held out a small bag. “Dry socks,” he said simply.

Her eyes lit up, a flicker of gratitude breaking through her exhaustion as she took the bag from him. Deacon moved back to the door, crouching to remove his boots. The leather was soaked through, the weight of the water making them feel like lead weights. He sighed, knowing the jungle’s unyielding moisture wouldn’t make drying them easy, but they were all he had. He set them by the fire alongside her boots.

Echo’s soft voice broke the silence. “I’ll share my blanket and socks,” she said, holding the bag with a teasing smile.

Deacon chuckled under his breath and began stripping out of his uniform. The wet fabric stubbornly clung to him, the layers he peeled away sticking to him like plastic wrap. He carefully laid the damp clothes out, draping them over chairs and makeshift racks around the room, ensuring they had the best chance to dry. Clad only in his boxer briefs, he sat down beside her, the heat from the fire licking at his skin.

“You keep the socks,” he said firmly. “As far as I’m concerned, I could run around the jungle in just my boxers. It’s warm enough in here.”

Echo glanced at the fire, her brows furrowing slightly. “I’m sorry. We can let the fire die down if it’s too hot.”

He shook his head, his expression softening. “There’s no way I’m letting that happen until you tell me you’re warm.”

Draping an arm over her shoulders, he pulled her gently against him, and she leaned into his chest, her breathing steady until a sudden cough wracked her body. She groaned softly, clutching her ribs. “My chest hurts,” she murmured. “It feels like an elephant sat on me.”

Deacon smiled faintly, his voice low and soothing. “I’m glad your chest hurts. And before you get mad at me, I’m not saying I want you in pain. I’m just glad you’re alive to feel it.”

His hand moved slowly along her arm as she let out a soft laugh that turned into another cough. “It does make sense,” she said quietly. “I’m still trying to put what happened into perspective.” She paused, her voice dropping even lower. “I swear I saw my aunt.”

“You said that before. Why is that so strange?” he asked, tilting his head to look at her.

She lifted her head from his shoulder, her eyes serious. “She died five years ago.”

Deacon’s gaze darkened with curiosity as he studied her face. He could see the sincerity in her eyes, the weight of whatever she’d experienced. “Can you tell me what happened? I’m interested in what you saw.”

She rolled her eyes, leaning back against him. “You’re going to think I’m insane—more than you already do.”

“First,” he began, his tone firm but kind, “I don’t think you’re insane. I think you’re an incredibly intelligent woman. Anybody who says otherwise or ridicules you for any reason will have to deal with me. Second, I want to know what you experienced. I know you were gone. You didn’t have a pulse. It could’ve been several minutes. I want to know what you felt—what happened.”

He tightened his arm around her slightly, his hand moving softly along her arm. “If you haven’t realized it yet, I’m not the kind of man who judges and finds people lacking. I’m the kind of man who supports you and tells you that you can get through this.”

She made a small sound, almost a sigh, and whispered, “She hugged me.”

Deacon tilted his head closer, his voice softening. “She hugged you?”

Echo nodded. “It was the most wonderful sensation. There was peace—total contentment. Nothing hurt. There was no sadness, no fear. It was just ... quiet.” Her voice wavered, and she paused before continuing. “She told me I couldn’t stay. When I asked why, she said I had to go back. She said ...” Her voice cracked slightly, and she swallowed hard before finishing. “She said Deacon needed me now.”

Deacon turned to face her fully, his hands taking hers gently. When her gaze met his, he offered her a reassuring smile. “Your aunt was right. I don’t know how it happened so fast, and I’m not going to play games—I realized how important you are to me on the way up the mountain. Hell, I probably realized it the first night we met. But after you were swept away, after we pulled you out of the water, and after you started breathing again, everything happened so fast. We were moving, climbing, fighting to get here. There wasn’t time to process any of it. But halfway up the

mountain, all those emotions hit me like a freaking freight train. I don't want this connection between us to stop. I don't want a life without you in it. Don't let that freak you out—I'm not some stalker or psycho. But there's an undeniable connection between us. Don't you agree?"

She nodded, her voice soft. "I think there's a remarkable connection. But it's kind of crazy, isn't it? I mean, shouldn't we date for a couple of years before we reach this point?"

He chuckled, lifting her hand to his lips and brushing a kiss across the back of it. "Only if you want to take the scenic route."

"I like the scenic route now and then. But perhaps not this time." Her lips curved into a soft smile. Her exhaustion was evident in the way her eyelids drooped.

He tapped his thigh gently. "Lay down and sleep. I'll watch over you."

She rested her head on his thigh, her gaze fixed on the fire. "I've never been religious," she murmured, "but I know in my heart there's something after this. Some scientists might say my brain was running out of oxygen, trying to rationalize my last moments. But I don't think that's what it was. It was too real. It lasted too long."

Deacon untangled her braid slowly, his fingers running through her hair as he listened. She continued to talk, her voice soft and thoughtful as she processed what she'd been through. He offered quiet comments, but mostly, he let her speak, giving her the space she needed.

Did he believe in the afterlife? In his line of work, death was ever-present. He couldn't prove or disprove what she'd experienced, but he could respect it. It was real to her, and that was all that mattered.

As the storm raged outside, rain pounded against the shelter. Deacon remained by her side, allowing her to talk and heal. It wasn't much, but it was all he could do at that moment. When she fell asleep, he shifted her onto the rolled-up pillow and settled down beside her. It had been one hell of a day.

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Deacon woke instantly, his senses sharp and alert. Something had pulled him from sleep, cutting through the relentless pounding of the rain against the shelter's thatched roof. The storm outside was unrelenting, and the jungle was alive with a symphony of rain pelting leaves, water rushing over what had once been solid ground, and the occasional crack of thunder splitting the night. Yet amid it all, another sound had been faint, almost drowned out by the storm.

He strained his ears, the air thick with the smell of damp earth and smoke from the fire's dying embers. There it was again—a small, plaintive cry. His gaze shifted to Echo. Her hands twitched against the blanket, her legs jerking as though trying to outrun something in her dreams. A soft whimper escaped her parted lips, and the sight twisted something deep inside him.

Sliding closer, Deacon reached out and gently pressed his hand to her forehead. Relief washed over him when he found her skin cool and free of fever, but the tension in her body told him she was trapped in a nightmare. He ran his hand carefully down her shoulder and along her arm, his touch light and meant to soothe.

She startled awake with a gasp, her wide eyes filled with confusion and fear. The sudden movement triggered a violent coughing fit. Deacon quickly shifted, pulling her upright and holding her close as tremors wracked her body. Her breath was ragged, each cough echoing painfully in the small space.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, his voice low and steady. “I’m here. You’re safe. Were you dreaming?”

She nodded weakly, the tremble in her body slowing but not stopping. “Dreaming,”

she whispered. “Yeah ... It was a dream. A nightmare.” Her voice cracked as she continued, her words tumbling out in uneven breaths. “Everything that happened this morning ... it replayed in my head. I could feel it all over again. The water. The suffocation. My lungs filling up.” She clutched her throat, her hand trembling as she pulled in a shallow breath. “It all came back.”

She leaned heavily against his shoulder, her forehead pressing into his chest as if trying to hide from the memories. The firelight played across her pale face, the shadows dancing with the storm raging outside.

“God, I hope that dream doesn’t come back,” she whispered.

Deacon arranged the pillow behind her, gently helping her back down onto the mat. Stretching out next to her, he pulled her close, sharing the pillow and draping his arm protectively over her waist. The warmth of her body against his reminded him of how fragile life could be.

“Someone once told me dreams are our subconscious trying to make sense of what we’ve been through,” he said softly, his voice barely audible over the rain.

She let out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a chuckle. “Then I have a lot to make sense of,” she replied, her tone laced with weary humor. “Like I didn’t have enough baggage before I took a dive in the floodwaters.”

Deacon didn’t laugh. Echo was probably one of the most composed women he’d ever met, even after everything she’d been through. But he knew the weight of her words, the vulnerability beneath her humor. He pressed a kiss to the back of her head, the motion gentle and grounding.

“Everyone has baggage,” he murmured. “What happened today was something exceptional. It’ll take time to process. Don’t worry—I’m not going anywhere.”

Her arm slid over his, holding him close. “I like that,” she said softly. “But, Deacon, I don’t want you to stay with me out of some sense of duty. I know I was your mission—that you needed to get me in and out. I’d understand if you needed a break. Right now, I’m probably more than you bargained for.”

He tightened his arm around her, a low chuckle rumbling from his chest. “Woman, you are not getting out of this relationship by using the fact that you almost died. I don’t run from trouble.”

She shifted slightly, glancing over her shoulder at him. “So, you admit I’m trouble?”

“Oh, yes, you’re trouble,” he said with a grin. “But trouble in the best possible way. You’re going to wreck all my plans for the future. You’ll haunt my thoughts when we’re not occupying the same bed. You’ll be in my thoughts every time I’m running a mission. Yeah, you’re trouble, all right. But it’s the kind of trouble I signed up for the moment I gave you my cell phone number.”

Echo turned to face him, adjusting her position until she was comfortable. He let his arm fall back over her waist, his hand resting lightly against her back. She stared up at him, her fingers brushing his cheek, her touch featherlight.

“Mentally and emotionally, I’m all over the place right now,” she admitted, her voice trembling. “But I want you to know ... if it weren’t for you, I don’t think I would’ve come back.”

Deacon stared into her eyes, her words sinking deep into his chest. Maybe her admission should’ve been a warning, a reason to pause. But instead, it filled him with a quiet warmth, a sense of purpose he hadn’t expected. The storm outside raged on, the rain a deafening roar as it battered the jungle, but there in the shelter, everything felt still.

As she closed her eyes and nestled closer, Deacon rubbed slow, soothing circles on the small of her back. His thoughts drifted to the jungle beyond the shelter walls. The Laos terrain was unforgiving. It was a dense, tangled expanse of vines and towering trees, now slick with rain and treacherous to navigate. The swollen flood waters roared like beasts, and the thick mud swallowed every footprint, erasing all traces of their passage.

Somehow, amid the chaos, he couldn't shake the feeling that today had been part of their destiny. The jungle might have been merciless, the mission brutal, but this connection—this woman—felt like the one thing that made sense.

CHAPTER 12

Echo found a rhythm in the long days and nights spent in the remote village. The team worked tirelessly, their efforts a testament to their resourcefulness and unity. They hunted game, gathered wild fruits, and repaired the bamboo walkways connecting the shelters. There wasn't a day they weren't shoring up paths to navigate the swampy, rain-soaked terrain. The jungle around them was ever present, encroaching closer even during monsoon rains. Dense foliage reached toward the sky, and vines twisted like ropes, growing several feet in one day.

Deacon and the team maintained a careful balance, splitting their time between largely remaining out of sight in the village and aiding its residents. In return, the villagers offered what they could: space, firewood, and their hospitality. Ralph visited her daily, and they talked about life and death, exchanging insights from his religious viewpoint. Having someone to confide in was helpful, and his guidance was appreciated. Evenings included shared meals in the larger shelter, with the team's camaraderie filling the space with warmth and laughter despite the storms raging outside. Echo cherished those moments; the easy banter and strong bonds among the men reminded her of a family created through trust and hardship.

Yet, the moments alone with Deacon were the ones she craved the most. Those stolen evening hours served as a lifeline, grounding her in the journey of recovery and survival. There was no internet, no television, and no distractions. Every night they talked and learned about each other. Their likes and dislikes were closely matched, except Deacon was a college football fan and she preferred the professional leagues. She smiled to herself and felt the warmth of those whispered words and warm laughs.

Nearly two weeks had passed since she'd drowned, and her body was slowly healing. The bruises on her chest had faded, and the soreness in her ribs was manageable as long as she didn't overexert herself. The persistent cough that lingered after physical activity was the last remnant of her ordeal, and even Bandit had ceased checking on her daily. By all accounts, she was on the mend.

But the night terrors refused to loosen their grip. Each time she awoke gasping for air, Deacon was there, steady and comforting, pulling her from the depth of her nightmares. Yet, even with his unwavering presence, she couldn't ignore the distance that had grown between them. His kisses were brief, his touches fleeting, and he never brought up intimacy. The unspoken gap between them gnawed at her. She couldn't shake the fear that he was only staying out of obligation, counting the days until he could return her to civilization and move on.

Now, she watched him crouch by the fire, adding kindling to coax the flames to life. The flickering golden light danced across his sharp features. Beyond the shelter, the jungle buzzed with life. The air inside the shelter felt warm, and the fire cast long shadows across the bamboo walls.

Echo stood, brushing her hands on her worn utility pants as she approached him. Tonight, she resolved, would be the night she finally bridged the gap between them. She placed her hands gently on his shoulders, her touch soft yet purposeful. Deacon paused, turning his head to look up at her with a curious expression.

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“I think tonight,” she said evenly, “I’d like to attempt to have sex with you.”

Deacon blinked, surprised by her bluntness, but the corners of his mouth lifted into a slow smile. “Bandit says you’re okay?”

She nodded, her lips quirking in a small, self-deprecating smile. “He said I’m fine as long as I don’t overdo it.”

Deacon rose to his full height, towering over her while radiating nothing but warmth. He pulled her into his arms, his hands resting on the small of her back as he studied her face. His dark, intense eyes searched hers before he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that was far from innocent. It was slow, deliberate, and utterly consuming, leaving her breathless.

When he finally pulled away, Echo was left trembling, her heart racing. She looked up at him, her thoughts in disarray. How had one man come to mean so much? Deacon consumed her—her thoughts, desires, and plans for the future. Everything revolved around him.

He slightly tilted his head, his gaze steady.

“What?” she softly inquired, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m trying to figure out how many different ways I can take you,” he said, his voice a low rumble filled with mischief, as a wicked smile spread across his face. “It’s been a long two weeks.”

She laughed, the sound light and genuine, and shook her head at his audacity. “And here I was afraid to bring up the idea of sex.”

“Why’s that?” he asked, his brows lifting slightly.

Her smile faltered for a moment as she met his gaze. “I didn’t want to think that what happened changed things between us, but it’s been on my mind.”

Deacon brushed a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. She’d left it loose since he’d untangled her braid. The waves fell to the small of her back. His fingers lingered in her hair, and she shivered at the warmth of his touch.

“I understand your concern,” he said gently. “But I’ll tell you again—nothing has changed for me. I know things have changed for you, and that’s why I didn’t bring up the possibility of sex. I didn’t want to push you or influence you.”

She rolled her eyes. Her lips curved into a teasing smile. “And by not bringing it up, you made me think you didn’t want me anymore.”

“God, woman,” he said, his voice filled with exasperation and affection, “I want you so badly I have the bluest balls in the country. But I wasn’t going to force you. I wasn’t going to be that guy.”

Her hands slid up his arms, fingers brushing over the strong muscles beneath his shirt until they wrapped around his neck. “For future reference,” she murmured, her tone light yet sincere, “you being that guy is perfectly fine with me. We both know we enjoy sex with each other. And expressing our desires to one another is healthy.”

Deacon chuckled, his grin wicked as he leaned closer. “If that’s healthy, I’m about to introduce you to the perfect physical specimen—twice because that’s all the condoms I have.”

Echo's soft laugh ended with a small cough that made Deacon's expression shift. Concern flickered in his eyes before they softened, his hand sliding to cradle the back of her neck as if steadying her was second nature. Slowly, he drew her closer, his lips grazing hers in a whisper of contact that sent a jolt through her. His voice, low and reverent, rumbled against her skin.

"Tonight will be slow," he murmured. "Tonight, I'm going to memorize every inch of you. Tonight is about discovering every nuance that makes you come alive."

The promise in his words sent a full-body shiver coursing through her. His words and tone ignited her like a live wire. She rose onto her toes, closing the delicate distance between them to capture his lips in a kiss that smoldered with anticipation. Deacon's touch was deliberate and reverent as his fingers skimmed her body, undoing the fabric barriers between them piece by piece. He undressed her slowly, each kiss against her newly exposed skin drawing her deeper under his spell.

Outside, the humid monsoon air hung heavy, wrapping around their shared breaths and muffling the quiet sighs that escaped her lips. He put on a condom and his lips charted a path down her body, their heat leaving invisible marks that branded her. His hands were both tenderness and strength, driving her to the brink of madness with every touch. Just as the tension mounted to unbearable heights, he shifted, teasing her senses with another aching, deliberate caress.

As her hands gripped his shoulders, she felt the raw power in the muscles flexing under her fingers as he moved. When his eyes met hers, they locked gazes with an intensity that took the breath from her lungs. She could feel the depth of his caring. Deacon entered her, his measured pace a silent vow of his promise to go slow.

She arched toward him, her body responding instinctively, but she forced her eyes open, needing to see him—this man who'd laid claim to her heart. Deacon cupped her face, threading his fingers through her hair as he kissed her with a passion that

transcended the physical. His touch was like a symphony, each measured stroke building to a crescendo that left her teetering on the edge of bliss.

Her skin burned with unrelenting need, her body taut and trembling as he moved with precision, reading her every response. And when he reached down, his fingers finding the sensitive bud between her thighs, she gasped, her control slipping entirely. The world fell away as her body clenched, spiraling into a release so profound it bordered on pain. She shattered beneath him, each wave of ecstasy pulling her further along until she could do nothing but hold onto him.

Deacon followed her over the edge, his body tense as he found his release. The raw power in him was breathtaking, yet the way he cradled her afterward spoke of a tenderness that unraveled her even more. He disposed of the condom quickly before pulling her into his arms, their bodies still slick with heat.

“God, that was good,” he breathed against her hair, his voice filled with wonder.

She tilted her head back to meet his gaze, a teasing smile curving her lips. “Just good?”

His mouth twitched as if suppressing a grin. “Exceptional. The real question is, can it be recreated?”

“Is that a matter of curiosity,” she asked, her tone light, “or are you conducting a scientific study?”

Deacon raised a brow, feigning serious contemplation. “Hmm ... scientific studies take years, right?”

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She widened her eyes in mock solemnity. “Sometimes decades.”

“Decades?” His grin broke through. “I pick that one.” Her fingers danced up his ribs, and he jerked slightly, his grin becoming a laugh. She gasped in delight, repeating the motion until he grabbed her hands. “You don’t want to do that,” he warned, his voice low with playful menace.

“I think I do,” she said, her tone daring. “I forgot you were ticklish.”

Deacon shook his head slowly, a spark of mischief lighting his eyes. “Payback will be hell.”

“Payback?” she asked, blinking with faux innocence. “Such as?” Before she could react, his hands found her ribs, and she shrieked with laughter, squirming in vain to escape his relentless tickling. “I give!” she cried, breathless but not coughing. He stopped immediately, pinning her beneath him.

For a moment, he simply stared at her, his expression raw and unguarded. The intensity in his gaze filled her with a warmth she’d never known, a confidence that came from being wholly seen and deeply cherished. This man was hers, and she was his.

He lowered his lips to hers, sealing the moment with a kiss that promised everything. Echo wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. In Deacon, she’d found something rare—something extraordinary.

Echo stretched slowly, the ache in her muscles confirming that last night hadn't been a dream. A satisfied smile played on her lips as she felt Deacon's arm snake around her waist, pulling her closer. She snuggled against his solid frame, resting her ear on his chest. His steady heartbeat created a comforting rhythm, but she heard him rumble, "Do you hear that?"

Lifting her head, she blinked and listened. "I don't hear anything," she said, her brows furrowing.

"Exactly. The rain stopped." Deacon patted her gently on her bottom. "Get dressed. I want to see what the jungle looks like and talk to Click about plans for extraction."

Echo moved aside as he rolled off the sleeping mat and began to dress. Her eyes lingered on him, admiring how his muscles flexed beneath his skin as he tugged on his pants. When he turned around and caught her watching, his eyebrows raised in silent question.

She grinned. "Nothing."

He tilted his head, skepticism evident on his face. "I'm not sure I believe that."

Laughing, she playfully said, "Okay, maybe I was admiring the deliciousness of the dish I was served last night."

Deacon threw his head back with laughter. "I've never been called a dish before."

Rolling onto her stomach, she propped her head on her elbow, her tone playful. "Maybe 'dish' wasn't the right word." She smirked. "Maybe I should've said 'feast.'" She wiggled her eyebrows for emphasis.

Deacon sat beside her, pulling on his socks and boots, his grin broadening. "I prefer

that term.” He leaned in, giving her a quick kiss on the lips before standing. “Now, get dressed, woman.” He grabbed his T-shirt, tugging it over his head with a flourish. “Show’s over.” He winked at her before stepping outside. “I’ll be at the big shelter.”

Echo smiled as she watched him leave, then took her time getting ready. After using the wash basin, she freshened up, combed through her long hair, and neatly braided it. When she finally stepped outside, the air felt damp and heavy, and the jungle around her was cloaked in muted gray light. Though the rain had stopped, dark clouds still churned overhead, promising more to come. Carefully picking her way along the bamboo walkways, she headed toward Deacon.

He stood at the edge of the village, his broad shoulders tense and his gaze fixed on the dense jungle below. Ranger and Ralph were with him, their postures mirroring his. As Echo approached, she asked, “What’s going on?”

Deacon raised a hand, signaling for silence, then tapped his ear. Realizing he was likely communicating with Click, she fell quiet. Her communication device had been lost during the flood—a casualty of her being pulled underwater. Deacon explained that because it was a spare and not custom-fitted, it had probably been swept away and was likely buried under ten feet of sediment by now.

She stood silently beside him, the weight of the jungle pressing in around them. At first, all she could hear was the distant hum of insects and the occasional call of a bird. Then, faintly, she heard it—a helicopter. Her heart leaped. “Is that for us?” she asked, her voice tinged with hope.

Deacon shook his head. “No. Click says the weather fronts are still too close together. The rain will start again within the hour. In three days, there’s supposed to be a break—maybe a four- or five-day window before the next front rolls in. That’s when we’ll leave.”

Ralph shifted uneasily, his expression wary. “Unless those people are looking for you.”

Deacon turned to him, his tone steady. “We won’t bring the cartel to your doorstep. We’ll keep watch and ensure no one approaches the mountain. Right now, they’re conducting lower-level grid searches.”

Ranger chimed in, his voice calm yet authoritative. “You can tell by the sound of the aircraft; they’re flying low, scanning the canopy. It’s a pattern—they haven’t moved to the mountain yet.”

Deacon nodded. “If we think they’re getting closer or there’s any chance someone might be coming up the mountain, we’ll bug out. We won’t leave anything behind that could trace back to you. Guardian looks after those who look after them.”

Ralph’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Guardian? You never told me you were with Guardian.” He rubbed the back of his neck, his tension easing slightly. “I’ve had two run-ins with your organization, and both times, I was impressed by the integrity of your units. That makes me feel a lot better.” He offered a small, sheepish smile. “I wish you’d told me sooner.”

Deacon chuckled. “Sorry for the unnecessary worry.”

Ralph shook his head. “No more worries. I’ll head back to the village now; I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. I guess I’m a bit of a mother hen that way.”

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Deacon observed as Ralph cautiously navigated through the mud toward the bamboo walkways. Once Ralph was out of earshot, Deacon turned to Ranger. "Prepare everything for an immediate departure. If we need to bug out, I want to be ready."

Ranger nodded, doing a one-eighty and heading back toward camp. Deacon draped an arm over Echo's shoulders, pulling her close. "What about you? Think you're ready for a high-speed move?"

She shrugged, her expression wry. "Well, you're not leaving me here, so I'd better be." Her confidence was genuine, but a quiet doubt lingered in her mind. She'd regained her strength, but her cardio wasn't where it used to be. How long she could keep up was the real question.

Deacon tapped his comm device. "Click, do you have an exfiltration plan yet?" He listened intently, nodding occasionally as the drone of the helicopter grew louder, then faded again.

Echo leaned against him, her nerves tightening. If the cartel's grid search brought them closer, it was only a matter of time before they started visually assessing the mountain. When that happened, the village would be exposed for helping them. The village elder had told them that the village and the cartel had an agreement that neither would bother the other. He wouldn't bring the cartel here.

"All right," Deacon said into the comm. "Provide the coordinates. We'll set out in three days."

There was a pause before Deacon's expression darkened. "No. If the village is

threatened, we're bugging out. Tell Ronan to get his ass here and get us out of this rain barrel." He laughed at whatever response Click gave before ending the conversation.

Echo tilted her head, curiosity sparking. "I take it Ronan's a pilot?"

"Ronan is my twin brother." Deacon glanced at her as they walked along the bamboo planks. The rhythmic squelch of mudbeneath the makeshift walkway accompanied their steps. "He's a pilot, but not for helicopters. He and his team volunteered to come in and extract us. Kind of a payback for a mission where we pulled his ass out of some serious shit."

Echo stopped, turning to him with raised eyebrows. "I was a bit tipsy when you told me you had a brother. Did you mention his name? I think I would've remembered something that unique."

Deacon chuckled, dropping an arm over her shoulder and pulling her close as they continued walking. "I may have, but not only do I have a brother, I also have two sisters. I was trying not to scare you off with the negative side of my family tree before I won you over with all this delicious feast."

Echo tilted her head back, laughing. "All the deliciousness aside, do you have any more surprises for me?"

Deacon hummed thoughtfully, his lips curving into a sly grin. "Yeah, probably one or two." He glanced down at her, his expression softening. "Nothing you won't be able to handle, though. I'm sure of that."

She narrowed her eyes playfully. "And you're not telling me now because ...?"

"Because I want our relationship to go a little further, be a little stronger, before I

spring all my family's insanity on you." He stopped walking for a moment, frowning in mock thought. "Don't worry—they're not serial killers or maniacs. Well ... Charley could've been, but nah, I don't think so."

Echo halted, grabbing his arm. "Wait, wait, wait. You said you had a brother named Ronan and two sisters. Who's Charley? Your dad? Uncle? Dog?"

"Nope." Deacon smirked. "Charley is actually Charlotte, my youngest sister. She's legitimately one of the craziest people I've ever met. No filter, does whatever she wants, and is probably one of the toughest people I know."

Echo took a moment to absorb that. "And your other sister?"

"Gabby." A fond smile tugged at Deacon's lips. "Her name's Gabrielle, but we call her Gabby. She's brilliant. Crazy intelligent. She's taken the hard road to get where she is, but now, she and Charley work at Guardian's headquarters. My brother Ronan's about to join them in a leadership position."

Echo paused as they approached a muddy patch. Deacon jumped over it easily, then turned to offer her his hand. She took it, her grip steady as he helped her across.

"What about you?" she asked as they continued walking. "Are you going to work at Guardian's headquarters?"

Deacon shrugged, his pace slowing. "Most likely. That's been the plan all along. My father worked for Guardian. Moving up is inevitable. But I'm not ready to sit behind a desk just yet. Sooner or later, I'll get too old for this, though, and having a comfortable office chair might not be the worst thing."

Echo's brow furrowed as she looked at him. "Actually, having a nice office chair doesn't really suck. It makes you soft, though. I can understand why you'd want to

keep doing this. It's in your blood, isn't it?"

Deacon nodded and turned to face her, his gaze steady. "What if you were in a serious relationship? Would you still like to do something else, something like this, maybe?"

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I suppose it depends on the mission, the setting, and whether the person I was in a relationship with was working with me. But if we were separated by countries, each doing completely different jobs? I'm not sure I could handle that."

Deacon grinned, placing his arm over her shoulder once more. "So, what you're saying is, if I had you on my team, you'd join me on missions, train with me, and actually enjoy it?"

Echo stopped suddenly and turned to face him. "First, I don't think there's room for another person on your team. Second, even if there were, why would you want it to be me? I wouldn't want to be 'Cap's woman,' resented by the team. And third, what skills could I possibly bring to your team that you don't already have? I don't speak another language, and I don't want to because English is hard enough for me. The only skill I have is my IT specialties. While I enjoyed my time in the military, I'm not one for rules and regulations—which is one of the reasons why I'm leaving the CIA."

Deacon froze, turning to her with raised eyebrows. He placed both hands on her shoulders, his gaze focused. "You're leaving the CIA?"

Echo nodded, her tone firm. "I've been thinking about this since before the flood. They've placed me in an office—a small corner one with a window, sure—but it's not where I belong. I love creating things. Developing the ideas no one else has considered. Monitoring systems and programs isn't what I want to do. And after getting a second chance at life, it's only reinforced that I can't keep doing things that

don't fulfill me. My job is the first issue I need to fix."

Deacon studied her for a moment, then gently cupped her cheek with one hand. "I'd be honored to have you on my team at any time. Would you need to train? Yes. Would the team accept you? They already have. What would you contribute to the team? Everything."

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She nodded, her voice quieter now. “I could train. I could work hard enough to fit on a team. Physically, I know I can. Mentally, however, I’m taking a step back from that life. I love building. Creating something entirely new. I think I’ll return to that after I give the CIA my notice. I’m not sure how large the market is for what I do, but perhaps a defense contractor will have something I can really dive into.”

Deacon smiled, his eyes warm as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Whatever you choose to do, you’ll excel at it. I’m sure there are one or two places that would be eager to hire you,” he said with a chuckle.

Echo narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to glance up at him as they walked toward the small shelter. “Why do you say it like that?”

He shrugged casually. “I know some people at Guardian; that’s all I’m saying.”

She stopped in her tracks, her expression stern as she shook her head adamantly. “No. If I’m going to have a job, I will have a job I’m qualified for and earned. I’m not taking handouts—not even from you.”

Deacon smirked but opened the door, gesturing for her to enter. “I can respect that. I get it—you don’t want a handout. But I never said Guardian would give you one. They only hire the best of the best.”

Echo laughed as she stepped past him into the shelter, turning to face him with a playful gleam in her eye. “The best of the best of the best, sir!” she quipped, imitating the iconic movie line.

Deacon threw his head back and laughed, his deep voice filling the small space. “Yeah, well, we don’t take on aliens or track them on Earth, but we seek out the best. And if Guardian were to hire you, that wouldn’t have anything to do with me. It’d be because of what you’re capable of. No amount of family connections or favors would get you hired for a position you weren’t qualified for.”

Echo settled into one of the small chairs, crossing her legs while raising an eyebrow. “You don’t even know if there’s a job opening, so all of this is moot.”

Deacon kneeled before her, resting his hands on her knees as his expression softened. “So, follow me through this bit of logic. If Guardian hired you to do what you already know—because you’re qualified for it—and I was still working in the field, do you think our relationship could grow?”

Her gaze softened as she leaned in, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and intertwining her fingers behind his neck. “Deacon, if our relationship could thrive through a monsoon and endure me drowning, it can overcome deployments and missions. Because separation of that nature is far less intense than what we’ve already faced.”

His lips curved into a smile, and he leaned forward, brushing his lips against hers in a slow and deliberate kiss. “Just wanted to make sure we were on the same page, babe.”

Her smile grew wider as she met his gaze, her eyes sparkling affectionately. “Not only are we on the same page, but I believe we’re even in the same paragraph. Maybe even the same line.”

Deacon leaned back slightly, studying her face with an amused glint in his eye. “I don’t know if you’d still feel that way if you knew what my paragraph was about. It’s forecasting the future.”

She leaned closer, her lips gently brushing against his as she whispered, “As long as that future includes you and me together, we’re on the same page.”

She kissed him again, slow and deliberate, before pulling back with a playful grin. “And now, we’re reading the same paragraph.”

Deacon’s eyes darkened with intensity as she kissed him once more, slipping her tongue between his lips. When she pulled back again, she added in a husky voice, “And we’re on the same line.”

The teasing remark shattered the last of his restraint. He reached for her, his strong arms encircling her waist as he pulled her off the chair and into his chest. She let out a soft laugh that quickly faded into a sigh as he held her close, their foreheads touching.

At that moment, words became unnecessary. They understood each other—it seemed they always had. Whatever the future held, they would face it together.

CHAPTER 14

Deacon tilted his head back, letting his eyes trace the clear sky. For the first time in over two weeks, he could see the soft, endless blue of the heavens. The view felt unfamiliar after so many days of relentless downpour. Beside him, Bandit trudged steadily, mud clinging to his boots as they made their way to the elder’s tent. The thick humidity hung heavy in the air, sticking to their skin like a wet blanket.

Inside the simple bamboo structure, Ralph sat with the village elder, their conversation quiet yet warm. Deacon nodded in acknowledgment, and Bandit stepped forward to translate as Deacon expressed his gratitude.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Deacon said sincerely. “And for providing us with

shelter and safety.”

The elder’s lined face softened into a wistful smile. His steady voice was rich with the wisdom of years. Bandit translated almost simultaneously: “It’s good we could help. It’s Christian to help.”

Ralph smiled at the elder, respect evident in his demeanor.

“Let him know Guardian will send payment for our time here to alleviate any hardship,” Deacon said.

Bandit conveyed the message, but the elder shook his head firmly, speaking almost reverently. Bandit continued, “Cap, he says he doesn’t want payment. When he was very young, he was rescued by an American. That man cared for him and ensured he returned to his people. He says the American could have killed him but didn’t. It was a tough time, but the man was kind and fair. He states this is a debt he owed, and now, it is settled.”

Ralph chuckled as he extended his hand. “Thank you for not killing me in the jungle.”

Deacon grasped Ralph’s outstretched hand with a firm grip. “Thank you for being curious enough to investigate the explosion,” Deacon said.

Ralph’s smile became thoughtful. “I believe a higher power brought us together. You can call it whatever you like, but?—”

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Deacon clapped Ralph on the shoulder, grinning. “Whether it was fate, a higher power, or sheer coincidence, I’m just grateful you were there. Take care of yourself, Ralph.”

As they exited the tent, the humidity had thickened. Mud clung to their boots as they made their way to the large shelter where the rest of the team waited. It was early, and the air remained muggy despite the fact the sun was only now rising. Deacon slung his pack over his shoulder and turned to address the group.

“We’re heading up over the mountain to the other side. That’s where the landing zone is.”

The team’s gazes followed his upward gesture, landing on the steep granite walls looming above them. The climb promised to be grueling.

Bandit turned to Echo. “Are you good with this?”

She nodded, adjusting the straps of her pack with a small, determined smile. “I might need to rest more than you, but I’ll make it.” She lifted her boot and grinned. “Look, Mom—no blisters.”

Bandit chuckled, nodding approvingly. “All right, but don’t overexert yourself. If you need a break, let us know.”

Deacon slipped an arm around her shoulders, his voice low but firm. “Believe me, I’ll be keeping a close eye on her.”

Ace smirked, his tone light despite the tension in the air as he said, “No one here doubts that, Cap.”

The team chuckled softly as they strapped on their packs. The distant hum of a helicopter spurred them into action. It wasn't their ride, of that Deacon was sure. More than likely, it was the cartel once again trying to locate the person or people who'd taken the device. The rhythmic thrum grew louder as it combed the jungle canopy below them. With Ranger taking point and Ace on their six, the team disappeared into the dense undergrowth, leaving no trace of their presence in the village.

The jungle was a relentless adversary. The monsoon rains had turned the ground into a swampy mire. Each step became a battle against the sucking mud. The air buzzed with the sounds of life—birds calling, insects chirping—but the steady drone of the helicopter was a grim reminder of their precarious position.

Some time later, Deacon called for a break, his sharp gaze scanning the team before he crouched beside Echo. “How are you holding up?” he asked, his hand resting lightly on her neck.

Echo's face was flushed, her breaths measured but shallow. She looked up, her resolve clear even through her fatigue. “I'm keeping up. It's not easy, and I won't pretend it is, but don't stop for me. I'll let you know when I need a break.”

Deacon pressed his forehead against hers, his voice dropping to a reassuring murmur. “I wasn't stopping just for you. About fifty yards ahead, the jungle breaks, and we'll be climbing straight up that mountain. Everyone needs to be refreshed before we hit the face—we won't be able to stop once we start.”

Echo followed his gaze to the granite walls towering above them, their rain-slicked surface glistening like polished glass through the sparse canopy. She swallowed hard.

“I’m not a great climber.” Deacon unbuckled his pack and pulled out a length of nylon rope, tying it securely around her waist before attaching the other end to his. “You’re stuck with me now,” she said wryly as she watched him.

“You bet I am,” he replied, his tone steady. Turning to his team, he called, “Next leg’s over the mountain face. Everyone ready?”

Ranger nodded. “Not much cover up there, Cap.”

Deacon nodded grimly. “I know, but the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Let’s hustle.”

The granite provided a welcome respite from the mud, but the rain-slick rocks were no less treacherous. Deacon and Ranger worked together to find foot and handholds, leading the team carefully upward. The helicopter’s drone ebbed and flowed, the sound blending into the jungle’s relentless noise.

As they reached the mountain’s crest, the helicopter lifted rapidly, its blades slicing through the humid air. “Shit,” Deacon muttered. “Take cover.”

Ace snorted. “What fucking cover?” he shot back, but the team quickly crouched behind boulders and rocky outcroppings, making themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

The helicopter hovered for a tense moment before banking sharply and retreating. The team held their positions, muscles taut with tension, waiting for its return. When the drone finally faded, Deacon stood, muttering a low string of curses under his breath.

Echo moved to his side, the slack rope between them pulling taut. “Do you think they saw us?” she asked, her wide eyes scanning their surroundings.

“There was no way they couldn’t have seen us,” Deacon said flatly, his voice a mix of frustration and resolve. He turned to the team. “We’re moving. Two and a half hours to the landing zone and our exfil team.”

Rip’s voice broke the tension. “They’re sending in a team for us?”

Deacon’s lips curved into a rare smile. “Ronan and his men.”

Ace let out a laugh. “That twin thing again, huh? I swear all the medical books say it’s not real, but I’ve seen it too many times to doubt it.”

As they traversed the rain-slick granite at the top of the mountain, the team moved with practiced precision. Every step was deliberate, their boots scraping against the uneven rock face. The air was sharp and cooler that high up, starkly contrasting to the oppressive humidity they’d left behind in the jungle below. Echo walked beside Deacon, her steps careful on the treacherous terrain.

“If I’m slowing you down, let me know,” she said, her voice steady but tinged with concern. “I can move faster if I have to.”

Deacon glanced at her, the corner of his mouth lifting in a small smile. He held out his hand, and she placed hers in his, her grip firm despite the strain of the climb. “You’re not holding us up,” he reassured her, his voice low but steady. “We’ll reach the landing zone in a little over two hours. If we were spotted, they’ll be waiting for us.”

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The weight of his words settled between them as he continued. “Ranger’s on point. He’ll see anything before it happens. Once we hit the canopy, we’ll all check our weapons. I’ll loan you my .45. Your 9mm washed away when you went under.”

Echo’s lips twitched into a faint smile. “Think I can handle that big of a weapon after my dip in the flood waters?”

Deacon shook his head, his voice breaking as he remembered what had happened. “I do.”

“What are you thinking about?” she asked quietly.

“When we pulled you out of the water. It hit me hard.” His grip on her hand tightened slightly, a brief but grounding reassurance. “It’s amazing you survived.”

Echo gazed up at him. He wondered if she could see the concern and worry he still felt from that day. He gently squeezed her hand, his thumb gliding over her knuckles. The connection felt like an anchor, grounding him.

Deacon’s gaze softened as he glanced at her again, taking in the determination etched into her expression. Damp from the humidity clinging to the air, her braid rested against her back like a rope. The rugged beauty of the granite peaks framed her profile, the jagged rocks stretching endlessly around them, bathed in the light of a clear sky.

They continued walking, the sound of their boots striking the stone merged with the sounds of the wilderness. The wind gusted across the bare ridge, bringing the faint

sound of thunder from the distance and the looming promise of another storm.

Deacon pushed his team hard, balancing the urgency of their mission with Echo's physical limitations. The oppressive jungle canopy closed in around them, the dense foliage dripping from the lingering monsoon rains. Mud clung to their boots like lead, and every step felt like a battle against the earth. The air was thick with humidity, and the acrid tang of damp vegetation filled their lungs.

"Click, how much longer?" Deacon barked into his comm device, his tone sharp as he checked his watch.

"Ronan and the team just boarded the helicopter," Click's voice crackled back. "They'll be airborne and heading your way in three or four minutes. That gives you thirty-four minutes to reach the landing zone."

"I copy," Deacon replied, his eyes flicking to his GPS as they advanced through the muck. "We'll make it," he assured him, though the tension in his voice betrayed the stakes.

"It's only about half a mile from here," Echo added, her voice steady despite the strain. The reassurance seemed to bolster her resolve, and she quickened her pace.

They pushed forward for another five minutes, the jungle's relentless sucking muck never easing. Then, Ranger's hand shot up, a silent signal that froze everyone in their tracks. He dropped to the ground in one fluid motion, and the rest of the team followed suit. Echo mimicked their movements with practiced precision.

"What is it?" Deacon asked, his voice low over the comms.

"Four—no, five hostiles," Ranger reported, his voice calm and measured. "All armed. They're heading this way."

Deacon's eyes flicked to Echo, calculating. "Can we skirt them?"

Ranger's voice came through after a pause. "We can try. They're moving south. We could head northeast."

"Then let's try." Deacon grasped Echo's hand, pulling her silently through the dense undergrowth. The thick jungle swallowed their movements as they veered north, the team falling into formation behind them.

Once they were deep enough to conceal themselves from the approaching hostiles, Deacon paused. He reached into his vest, pulling out his .45, and handed it to Echo, their eyes meeting briefly. She nodded, her grip firm on the weapon. No words were necessary; she understood the gravity of the situation.

Deacon lifted his M4 to ready position, his senses heightened. The team mirrored his movements, their rifles raised, eyes scanning the dense jungle as they moved northeast. The damp forest floor muffled the sounds of their footsteps, but the tension was electric, each member hyper-aware of their surroundings.

Then, the sharp crack of gunfire shattered the jungle's oppressive quiet. Instinctively, all six of them dropped to the ground.

"Status!" Deacon demanded, his voice low but urgent.

"Clear," came the responses, one by one. He glanced at Echo, who nodded quickly, signaling she was unharmed.

"Where the fuck is he?" Deacon muttered, his gaze darting to Ranger. The other man shrugged, his expression taut.

Ace's voice came through the comms. "Trying to get eyes now, Cap. Hold." The

seconds dragged, every sound amplified in the tense silence—the drip of water from the leaves echoed along with every faint rustle of the jungle floor. Then Ace’s whisper cut through. “I’ve got one in my sights, Cap. Permission to engage?”

“Where are the others?” Deacon asked, unwilling to spark a firefight without knowing the full threat.

There was a long pause before Ace came back. “Two between you and Ranger. Two between Echo and Bandit. Two more between Bandit and Rip. I’ve got mine dead to rights. They’re moving straight for us, walking in a line like they’re herding pigs to slaughter.”

Deacon ground his teeth, his mind racing. “Hold fire until we’re sure we can take them all. They’re going to get close—damn close.”

Bandit gave a thumbs-up from his position, and Rip’s voice came through the comms, laced with grim amusement. “You want me to give ’em a little welcoming surprise?”

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“If you can do it without getting us killed, yes,” Deacon replied.

Rip chuckled softly. “Haven’t killed you yet, have I?”

Quiet laughter rippled through the comms, breaking the tension for a heartbeat.

Deacon never stopped scanning the brush, his finger hovering near the trigger. The jungle seemed to press in tighter. The recent rains amplified the thick undergrowth. Every sound—every shift in the foliage—felt magnified. The usual chorus of insects and birds had fallen silent, a sure sign of nearby danger.

A leaf moved, lifting slightly against the breeze. Deacon’s sharp eyes locked onto it, his body coiled like a spring. Raising his rifle, he rested his cheek against the stock, his sights trained on the spot. Seconds later, a man emerged, his rifle slung loosely and pointed skyward as he struggled through the muddy terrain.

“Cap,” Ace’s voice came through, tense and clipped.

“Hold,” Deacon commanded. The man stumbled forward, oblivious to the team lying in wait. One by one, more figures emerged from the undergrowth, their weapons glinting dully in the filtered light.

“Rip, let it go,” Deacon ordered, his voice a deadly whisper.

The explosion ripped through the jungle, the blast tearing apart the forest floor and sending dirt and debris skyward. Cries of confusion and pain erupted as the team sprang into action. Deacon’s rifle snapped up, his finger squeezing the trigger as he

fired on a hostile directly in his path.

“Cap! There’s more incoming!” Ace called out. “Shit—they’ve scattered!”

The firefight erupted in earnest, the sharp cracks of gunfire echoing through the jungle. Deacon moved with precision, his team’s movements seamless as they eliminated targets one by one. Then, beneath the chaos, he felt it—a low rumble beneath his boots.

“Echo,” he barked, turning toward her. Her wide eyes met his. She dropped to her knees and put her hand flat against the trembling ground. The noise grew, a deep, rolling thunder that wasn’t from the sky.

“Holy shit!” Deacon shouted. “It’s a fucking landslide! Move—north, now!”

Grabbing Echo’s hand, he hauled her to her feet, dragging her through the jungle as the ground behind them gave way. Trees snapped like matchsticks, the roar of the landslide deafening as it tore down the mountainside and obliterated everything in its path.

They ran until Echo couldn’t anymore. Deacon let go of her hand and turned to look back. The earth continued to shift, the mudflow carving a brutal, destructive path down the mountain.

Deacon crouched low in the undergrowth, signaling his team to do the same. The thick foliage provided minimal cover, but they used what they had. The tension was palpable, the sounds of destruction still echoing through the jungle.

“Damn it, Rip, you blew up the fucking mountain,” Ace groaned, his weapon up and his eyes scanning the direction they’d come from.

“How was I supposed to know the son of a bitch would slide down on our landing zone?” Rip shot back, his voice a sharp whisper.

“Quiet.” Deacon’s tone cut through their bickering like a blade. He tapped his comm device. “Click, alternate landing zone.”

“I’ve got two options. I can’t see you under the canopy. Where are you?” Click’s South Boston accent boomed through the comms.

Deacon pulled out his GPS and gave Click their exact coordinates.

“Okay, yeah, to your south, you—” Click started, but Deacon cut him off.

“No. There’s been a landslide to the south. North and east are clear of hostiles.”

“Okay, okay, hold on,” Click replied, the sound of furious typing in the background. The jungle around them was eerily silent, the usual cacophony of birds and insects replaced by the oppressive weight of their situation.

“Got it,” Click finally said, spitting out new coordinates. Deacon entered them into his GPS, the glow from the screen illuminating his hardened features as he oriented himself to the new landing zone.

“Let’s go,” he ordered. “I’ve got point. Ranger, you take care of Echo.”

“Echo can take care of herself,” she said from beside him, her voice steady but quiet. “But I’ll listen to what he says.”

Deacon’s gaze lingered on hers for a moment longer than it should have. She nodded, her expression firm. “I know,” she said softly.

Deacon blinked, surprised by her words. Did she know how much she'd come to mean to him? He hoped so.

“Let's move,” he said, shaking off the thought.

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The team moved in formation, staying low as they navigated the treacherous terrain. Rain-soaked mud pits and gnarled roots were everywhere, but Deacon expertly guided them around the worst obstacles. The oppressive humidity clung to their skin, and the faint smell of sulfur lingered in the air from the earlier firefight.

“Almost there,” Deacon said, glancing at his GPS. “Click, where’s that chopper?”

“Four minutes out,” Click responded.

Deacon held up a fist, halting the team as they neared the clearing where the helicopter was scheduled to land. He scanned the area, his eyes narrowing. “What’s up?” Ranger asked quietly from behind him.

“The shadow over there by the rock outcropping,” Deacon murmured, pointing with his rifle. “It wasn’t there the first time I looked.”

The team’s eyes shifted to the rock formation, weapons raised. “I see him. Fuck,” Bandit swore, his voice low.

Echo touched Deacon’s shoulder and motioned to his left. “There,” she whispered. He shifted his gaze and saw what she had—a figure crouched among the brush. A quick scan revealed another hostile ten yards down.

“Three,” Deacon muttered under his breath. “Probably more.”

They’d be shredded if they tried to board the helicopter now. Even the chopper itself would be a sitting duck.

“Yo, D. Where the hell are you, and what the fuck happened to the mountain?” Ronan’s voice broke through the comms, a godsend.

“We’re on the south side of the landing zone. Bogies on the north side,” Deacon reported, his tone grim. “Don’t bring that chopper out here; you’ll be a lead balloon.”

“Oh, you of little faith.” Ronan laughed. “Hit it, man!”

“What are you?—”

The deafening roar of a helicopter split the air as it skimmed the canopy, its skids brushing the tops of the trees. The unmistakable whine of the M61 20mm rotary cannon engaged, and the jungle on the north side of the clearing was torn apart in a hail of gunfire. Trees exploded, and the underbrush was reduced to splinters as the helicopter strafed the area. The chopper then pulled up sharply, out of range of any retaliatory fire.

A second helicopter followed, cutting low over the canopy. “Ronan, on your six!” Deacon shouted, spotting the cartel’s helicopter giving chase.

“Copy,” Ronan replied, his voice calm despite the chaos.

“Cap! Incoming. To the south. I see three,” Ace’s warning came through, cutting into Deacon’s focus.

“Down!” Deacon hissed, grabbing Echo’s arm and dropping with her to the ground. She crawled behind a small stack of rocks, cradling her .45 as she lay prone. Deacon moved left, his team fanning out and taking up firing positions.

The high-pitched whine of the mini cannon faded into the background as gunfire erupted. The hostiles had learned from their earlier mistake, advancing in a staggered

pattern rather than a straight line. The firefight was brutal. Deacon rolled right, narrowly avoiding a bullet that struck the mud where he'd just been.

Above them, the cartel's helicopter spun out of control, smoke billowing from its tail. "Fuck! Move!" Deacon shouted, his voice cutting through the gunfire.

The damaged aircraft spiraled downward, heading straight for their position. Echo rolled and sprinted to the right, firing as she moved. Deacon covered her, his rifle snapping off precise shots. He dropped one hostile who had taken a knee thirty meters away. The man would never fire another shot.

The helicopter clipped the canopy, tearing through the jungle like a machete before slamming into the ground. The explosion was deafening, a fireball consuming everything in its path as debris and flames rained down.

"Get out in the field!" Ronan's voice came through the comms as his chopper circled back, hovering over the far side of the clearing. "I'm going to clear out that side of the jungle."

Deacon grabbed Echo, and the team sprinted into the open. "Clear!" he shouted as soon as everyone was exposed. The high-pitched scream of the rotary cannon firing two thousand to six thousand rounds per minute was music to his ears as it decimated what remained of the cartel's forces.

The whine of the helicopter's machine gun suddenly stopped, replaced by the low thrum of its blades as it hovered, gunners scanning for any signs of hostile forces. The team crouched low, weapons ready, breaths controlled. Finally, the helicopter lowered, and Deacon gave the signal.

His team moved in sync, crouching low as they sprinted through the undergrowth toward the aircraft. Echo's hand was firmly in his, her grip steady, but her pace

faltered as they reached the open field. Deacon didn't hesitate. When she stumbled, he not-so-graciously boosted her into the helicopter. She twisted around, frowning at him, her lips moving in words he couldn't hear over the roar of the rotors.

Deacon climbed in after her, securing the door behind him, and pulled her onto his lap to make room. She spun around, her eyes narrowing. Even without hearing her, he knew she wasn't thrilled about the "booty boost." He winked at her, a teasing smile tugging at the corner of his lips. She rolled her eyes, but a small smirk betrayed her amusement as she leaned back against him.

Once they were secured, Wraith passed out headsets, the bulky devices muffling the thunderous roar of the helicopter. Almost immediately, Click's familiar voice crackled over the helicopter's comms. "I've got you on satellite, finally. No further aircraft in the area. You're clear back to South Vietnam."

The pilot confirmed the information. His tone clipped and professional. "All six accounted for," he added.

Click chuckled dryly. "Yeah, I saw their heat signatures. I didn't figure one of the hostiles would sneak on board. Cap, Alpha wants you to call as soon as you're in a private location—and before you talk to the CIA."

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Deacon frowned, his brow furrowing. “Copy that.”

Echo glanced at him questioningly, but he shook his head. “No idea.”

Across the cabin, Ronan, seated at one of the gunner stations, turned around and lifted his dark visor. “We should do this more often,” he joked, a grin spreading. “Seems like we get to play with all the big toys when we do.”

Wraith’s voice chimed in over the comms, dry and sardonic. “No, thank you.”

The team chuckled, the tension in the cabin easing slightly. Echo turned to Deacon, her confusion evident. He smiled. “I’ll explain later.”

Ronan interjected, “Not unless I’m there. Seems whenever you tell the story about Syria, you leave out most of what my team did.”

Deacon laughed, shaking his head. “And I’m sure when you tell this story, you’ll conveniently forget most of what we did.”

“You’re damn right,” Ronan shot back with a grin. “You’re lucky the rain stopped when it did. We intercepted cartel comms—they were bringing in more men and equipment to search for you.”

Deacon’s smile faded. “So, they knew we hadn’t left the jungle.”

Juggernaut, Ronan’s man, grunted. “With those rains and your timing, extraction wasn’t exactly on the table.”

Echo leaned forward, her voice cutting through the chatter. “Since Deacon hasn’t bothered to introduce me, my name’s Echo.” Her teasing tone drew raised brows and amused smirks from the men. “Yes, hippie parents. Long story,” she added with a dismissive wave. “I work for the CIA—though, honestly, the future there isn’t looking great. Thanks for the assist. Things were getting a little too hot for this office worker.”

Wraith snorted, his grin widening. “Office workers are soft.”

Ronan’s team burst into laughter, and Echo turned to Deacon, her brow raised in question. He shrugged. “I might’ve mentioned that Ronan’s about to take a desk job at headquarters. Sounds to me like his team’s giving him some shit about it.”

“Just a little bit,” Stryker chimed in, grinning.

Deacon introduced the rest of Ronan’s team, pointing to each man in turn. “Let me introduce you. That’s Ronan, my twin brother, obviously. Over there is Juggernaut—Jug for short—and Stryker. Wraith is over there by Ranger. And him?” He gestured toward the new face in the crowd. “I have no clue who the FNG is.”

Echo gasped, turning to him. “You did not just call him the fucking new guy to his face!” She glared at Deacon before turning and smiling apologetically at the man. “I’m so sorry. Normally, he’s a decent human being.”

“Bullshit.” Ronan coughed and both teams laughed.

The man chuckled and waved her off. “It’s a rite of passage. I’m Hammer. Temporary fill-in. Wolf’ll be back soon.”

Deacon explained further when the helicopter fell silent. “Wolf was injured during the Syria mission. Traumatic brain injury. He’s going through rehab.”

Ronan's jaw tightened, but he nodded. "It's slow, but he's not giving up, and neither are we."

Hammer added, "That's why I'm here. Wolf'll get back to fighting form. When he does, this is his team—not mine."

Deacon appreciated Hammer's integrity. Although he knew this team wasn't his permanent placement, his professionalism and dedication would enhance any team he was part of.

The pilot's voice broke over the comms. "We're over South Vietnam airspace. Five minutes to the helipad. There's an ambulance waiting as you requested."

Echo turned to Deacon, frowning. "Who's the ambulance for?"

Deacon lifted a brow, staring at her. "You."

"I don't need an ambulance! I'm fine!"

"Two weeks ago, you drowned. You died. You're going to the hospital."

She crossed her arms, scowling. "Since when did you become my boss?"

The men in the cabin found sudden interest in anything but the argument. If they could've walked off the helicopter mid-air, Deacon was sure they would have.

He leaned closer. "I'm not your boss, but I am your significant other. I want to make sure there's no lingering infection or damage from the CPR. You can't argue with that."

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She narrowed her eyes but relented with a shrug. “Significant other, huh? I guess that’s better than boyfriend, isn’t it, Sparky?”

Ronan’s laughter erupted across the comms. “Sparky? Oh, please tell me where that came from.”

Before Echo could answer, Deacon clapped his hand over her mouth. “No. We’re not discussing that. Are we?” He tilted her face toward him, narrowing his eyes.

She slowly shook her head, eyes alight with amusement. Sighing, he slowly released her.

As soon as he did, she grinned. “Don’t worry, Sparky. That’ll remain between us.”

Ronan groaned. “That’s not fair. I need to know!”

Echo shook her head, leaning into Deacon’s chest as he wrapped his arms around her. A few minutes later, Deacon glanced at Ronan. His brother met his gaze and gave a wink and thumbs-up.

Deacon tightened his hold on Echo. Yeah, he was in love. And wasn’t that a fucking revelation? Now, the question was, what the hell was he going to do about it?

They landed, and Deacon grabbed Ronan in a hug. “You’ll be at the hotel tonight?”

“Damn straight. We’ll talk then. Go take care of her.” Ronan slapped him on the back and smiled. “That bug has bitten you, hasn’t it?”

Deacon glanced back at Echo, who was talking to Ranger and Wraith. Well, Ranger. Wraith just nodded occasionally. “Hard and right on the ass.”

Ronan laughed and put his hands on his hips. “Don’t fuck this up.”

“Excuse me? Fuck it up?” As if. Well, he’d try not to. The only thing was he had no idea how to proceed, but that should be kind of natural, right?

“Yeah, fuck it up. You’re not used to being in love.”

“Oh, and now, you’re the expert in the field?” Deacon crossed his arms over his chest.

Ronan smiled. “Nope, but Dad is.”

Deacon blinked. Dad? What? “Huh?”

“Dad’s here, in country.”

Deacon’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “Why?”

“They were in Seoul when they heard I was coming over to pull your asses out of the jungle. Depending on how you two feel, they want to have dinner tonight or tomorrow night.”

He glanced down at the uniform he’d worn for the past two weeks. “Tonight is fine, I guess. Dude, you’re going to need to pull a miracle out of your ass and get Echo and me some decent clothes.”

“Too late. Mom already took care of that. She said she remembers all too well when Dad came out of the field. I think Con got Echo’s sizes for Mom. I’m not sure how

that happened, but hopefully, she won't mind whatever deep dive he did to find out the information."

"I hope not." Maybe that topic wouldn't come up. Hell, who was he kidding? She'd ask. Her mind was one of the hottest things about her. Not the hottest, but ... it was sexy as fuck.

"So, seriously, on the level ... is she the one?" Ronan asked him the question he'd been asking himself since the night he'd met her. Hell, was it only just over two weeks ago? God, they'd lived a lifetime in those few days, hadn't they? He nodded. The words weren't there to share what she meant to him, but Ronan got it. He understood. "Do me a favor and ask Mom not to be too ..."

"Snoopy? Interested? Herself?" Ronan offered.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen, is it?"

"Not in our lifetime," Ronan agreed. "Ah, it looks like the ambulance finally got through the traffic jam." Ronan nodded toward the flightline gate, where the ambulance wound through the protective barriers after being screened at the gate.

"Good. I'll see you at the hotel."

"Good luck at the doctors." Ronan turned with him to walk over to where Echo was standing with his and Ronan's team. She glanced up at him and then over at the ambulance. She scrunched her nose and made a face, which made all the guys around her laugh. She couldn't fit into his life any better.

He escorted Echo into the hospital and found that Click had apparently arranged shower facilities for them. He made a mental note to make sure the guy got a raise. Whatever Guardian was paying him wasn't enough.

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After making sure Echo was good to go in her shower area, he hit his comms. “Click, patch me through to Alpha. I’m alone, but I can be overheard.”

“I copy. Standby.”

Deacon started stripping and was turning on the water when Alpha came on line. “Am I interrupting something?” Jacob King’s laughter was unmistakable.

“Nope, you’re joining me for a shower that is over two weeks past due.” He stepped under the water and realized the small stall only held a portion of him. “God, what I wouldn’t give to be back in my shower,” he mumbled as he grabbed the small slice of antiseptic soap and unwrapped it.

“Give me a rundown.”

Deacon glanced at the locked door. “I’m not secure. Sequestered, but not secure.”

“Then use a broad brush.”

Meaning don’t get specific but give him a rundown: “We obtained the required equipment and got that out.”

“That much I know,” Jacob said with a slow drawl.

“Fine, sorry for the recap. The CIA specialist was swept away in a flash flood. A wall of water came out of nowhere and swept her under. It took a couple of minutes before we located her.”

“I heard from Click that your team resuscitated her.”

“Yeah. Bandit knows his shit.” Deacon lathered up as he spoke. “She was pretty pitiful for a couple of weeks but never complained. Not once.”

“Sounds like our type of people,” Jacob noted.

“Damn straight. When the weather finally broke, we left the village that had sheltered us and went over the top of the mountain.”

“Bold move,” Jacob murmured. “How did the officer handle it?”

“Like a fucking trooper.” Which she had. “However, the people we acquired our equipment from were looking for us—a helicopter. The pilot was insane, flying in weather we would not lift off in. We were at the mountain’s crest when we believed he saw us. Some of his acquaintances were waiting with a welcome wagon. We tried to reciprocate the welcome with a small fireworks display, and then the mountain broke in half and slid down on top of the jungle.”

Jacob chuckled. “I can’t wait to read this report.”

Deacon kept going. “We diverted to another pickup point but were again met with the welcome wagon. It was at that time Panther team arrived. The rest is, as they say, history.”

“Panther team?” Jacob’s surprise was not what he expected.

“Ah ... yeah? Why? Didn’t you know they were here?”

“They’re supposed to be on R&R.” Jacob’s tone was stern.

“So, maybe they were just having some fun?” Deacon scrubbed the small slice of soap through his hair. “Besides, we were pretty well wedged between a rock and a hard place. We would’ve lost people, there’s no doubt about it.” Especially since Echo was tapped out. She was a warrior, but her cardio was at its max. He wouldn’t leave her, and his team wouldn’t have left him. Yeah, some bad shit could have happened if Ronan hadn’t arrived when he did.

There was a long silence. Deacon didn’t interrupt Jacob’s digestion of the information, but he did wash his hair again. Fuck, the hot water was great, but bending damn near to his belly button to wash out the soap sucked.

“I’ll talk with Jason about the lack of coordination. That won’t happen again for either of you.”

Deacon spoke upside down, water streaming down his face. “Who was supposed to show up for the assist?”

“Dagger and Viper teams are on call in the area. I assigned Viper team.” Deacon heard Jacob typing. “And I just sent a message to Jewell to find out who canceled the order.”

“That sounds like an internal issue. Glad I’m not in your chair.”

“Your brother will be eventually. Hell, you both could share the responsibility. Lord knows with the teams we have across the globe, two of you are needed.”

“I like being in the field, Uncle Jacob.”

“And your CIA officer? Does she like you being in the field?”

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Deacon straightened, hitting his head on the shower head. “Damn it, that hurt.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Why did you ask about Echo?”

“Deacon, I’m not a fool. I’ve seen the transcripts from your mission, and I can put two and two together to the point that they actually total four.”

“Why the hell did you pull our transcripts?” Deacon turned off the water. “My team expects their communications to be private. Shit is said that doesn’t need to be up-channeled.”

“True, that’s why we only do quarterly audits. We’ll never have another Charlie Team situation. The original team, I mean. It imploded when Guardian first started.”

“That happened a lifetime ago, Uncle Jacob.”

“People would still be alive if there were checks and balances. We do audits not to invade your privacy but to ensure no team is going rogue. No one knows except management and, now, you. Besides, your mission was randomly selected. I was just glazing over it when I noticed some interesting conversations ... Sparky.”

Deacon dropped his head. “Shit.” Jacob’s laughter dug into his embarrassment. “We met the night before the assignment. Neither one of us knew who each other was.”

“We’ve verified that. I also pulled her clearance paperwork to track down any loose

ends and completed a background check on her. There were no loose ends, and she passed the check with flying colors. She's good to go if you were considering bringing her into the organization."

"Yeah, well, I don't know if things are at that point. She plans on resigning from her current employment but doesn't know what to do with her future. I'm not going to push her one way or the other."

"Hmmm ... she does what exactly?"

Deacon chuffed a laugh as he pulled on the scrubs. "Honestly, I have no clue. It involves IT. She mentioned nanotechnology once, but I didn't delve any deeper. Other things were more important at the time. Whatever she does, she's damn good at it, and her employer has been ignoring her warnings about their shortcomings in redundancy."

"I'll check into that. You know we're always looking for quality people."

"I do, but as I said, she wants to take time off."

"Got it. Still, I'll provide you with information should she feel inclined to work with us."

"I appreciate that, Uncle Jacob." He glanced down at his scrub pants. "Shit, the scrubs they gave me are at least a foot too short." He pulled the tie as tight as it would go at the waist. Hopefully, they wouldn't fall off his ass as he walked through the hall of the hospital.

"Easy fix. Shove them in the top of your boots," Jacob offered. "Not many doctors over there as tall as you."

Deacon put on the hospital socks and shoved his feet into the boots. “Hey, what do you know, that works.”

“Would I ever give you bad advice?”

“Nope.” Deacon laughed. “Unless it’s about horses. Then, yes. Definitely, yes.”

Jacob laughed. “Okay, it isn’t my fault you weren’t a good enough rider to handle Whiskey.”

“Whiskey was an unbroke gelding that Uncle Frank had bought from rodeo stock. He was rank.”

Jacob laughed. “But you stayed with him.”

“Until I landed on my ass.”

“True.” The man laughed. “Good times.”

“For you.” Deacon couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. “Did you know Mom and Dad are here?”

“No,” Jacob said truthfully. “They don’t check in with me. Tell them I said hey and that Frank and Amanda miss them.”

“Will do. Oh, and, Uncle Jacob, Ronan and his team saved our asses. I won’t tell him that, but we would’ve been in a badspot had he not shown up with that M61 20mm rotary cannon and bolted it on that chopper.”

“And now I know whythatrequisition is on my desk.” Jacob sighed. “At least he fucking asked for it. He didn’t wait for permission, but he asked for it.”

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“It was needed.” Deacon shrugged on his shirt. Damn, if he flexed his arms, he’d split the seam. “I need to get back to Echo. Is there anything else?”

“No. Just get me the full details of the operation as soon as possible. Please add any details in the outbrief you think I should be aware of. You and your team will return with Ronan and his team for R&R the day after tomorrow. I’ll get Click to start your transportation plan.”

“Thank you. Take care of yourself, Uncle Jacob.”

“Will do. Say, have you seen all of Panther team?”

Deacon chuckled. “Yep. Wraith is doing great. He and Ranger were hanging out.” Of the helicopter, but Deacon didn’t figure Wraith’s dad needed to know that.

“Thanks,” Jacob said simply. “Alpha’s clear.”

Deacon patted the pockets of his filthy uniform to ensure nothing was left, pocketed his wallet and cell phone, and tossed the grimy fabric into the garbage bin in the room. He tugged at his shirt with little effect. “Whatever.” He opened the door and walked to the small examination room where Echo was using the attached bathroom to shower. He attracted a lot of looks from the staff and people in the hallway. Yeah, I’d look, too. He chuckled and opened the door, making his way to the small bathroom. He’d only been away briefly but needed to check on her to see if she was okay or needed anything. The desire to protect her from anything and everything was intensely ingrained into his psyche. The feeling was stronger and more intense than any attraction he’d experienced. What he felt for Echo was unique and, if he were

honest, a bit scary.

CHAPTER 15

Echo luxuriated in the confines of the small hospital shower. The hot water bounced off her shoulders and cascaded down her back, soothing the ache in her muscles. The antiseptic-smelling shampoo she'd been given foamed in her hair as she scrubbed it clean, the scent sharp and clinical. She had to bend awkwardly to wash her long hair, a reminder that she towered over the locals at five foot ten. The shower stall was barely big enough to accommodate her, and the cramped space made her movements clumsy.

She whacked her elbow on the tiled wall, and the soap she'd been holding shot out of her hand like a bar of oiled ice. It hit the floor with a resoundingthwack.

"Dammit," she muttered, carefully squatting down to retrieve it, mindful not to knock her head on the shower head.

"Are you okay in there?" Deacon's voice boomed through the thin bathroom door, startling her. She could practically hear the smirk in his tone.

"Yeah, I just dropped the soap," she called back, chuckling softly. "I'd invite you in to help me find it, but, quite frankly, there isn't enough room in here for me, let aloneyou."

The shower curtain rustled as Deacon tugged it open just enough to peek his head through. His freshly washed hair was slicked back, and water dripped off the ends onto the floor. He grinned at her, his dark eyes dancing with mischief.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I think I had to wash half my body at a time in the other bathroom. But it's good to be clean." His grin widened into a smirk.

“Amen!” she replied, her voice light with humor. “I’ll be done in just a sec.”

“I’ll let the staff know you’ll be ready shortly.”

“Thank you.”

When they’d first arrived at the hospital, the staff ushered them straight to the showers. It was clear that this had been coordinated in advance. Echo felt profoundly grateful for the opportunity to wash away the jungle's grime, sweat, and mud. Living in field conditions had taken its toll, and while she prided herself on being tough, she couldn’t deny the sheer bliss of a hot shower. Perhaps that office chair had softened her more than she cared to admit.

The water sputtered as she turned it off and grabbed the small, stiff towel hanging nearby. It felt more like sandpaper than cotton, but she made do, patting herself dry. The scrubs she’d been given were an unflattering shade of pastel pink and at least two inches too short, exposing her ankles. She rolled her eyes at the outfit but slipped into them anyway. Function over fashion.

Stepping out of the bathroom, she found Deacon waiting for her in matching green scrubs. The pants were far too short for his tall frame, stopping at the tops of his boots. Ever resourceful, he’d tucked them into his boots, creating a look that was part combat-ready and part hospital chic.

“That’s a unique look,” she teased, her lips twitching into a smile.

He grunted, adjusting the waistband of the too-tight scrubs. “Wait until you put your boots on.”

She sighed dramatically. “Do I have to? No offense, but I’ll be happy if I never see those boots again.”

He grimaced. “We’ve got clothes being delivered to the hotel. Unfortunately, until we get there, we’ll be stuck in these.” He gestured to their scrubs. “Apparently, the staff didn’t think putting our old uniforms back on and wandering around the city was a good idea.” His wry smile made her laugh.

“I’m sure I’ll survive the embarrassment of high-water scrubs.” She climbed onto the small stool at the end of the exam table and sat down, swinging her legs slightly. “You know, I really don’t need to be seen by a doctor.”

Deacon crossed the room to her in two long strides, and she instinctively spread her legs, letting him step between them. He cupped her cheek with one hand, his gaze soft but serious.

“I just want to make sure,” he said quietly. “A few tests, a couple of X-rays—just to help me sleep at night.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and smiled up at him. She adored this man. He was so tough, absolutely brutal when he needed to be, but asking her to ease his mind by submitting to a few medical tests. Yet, her inner sarcasm wouldn’t stay hidden. She lifted her eyebrows and said, “I thought I had a way to help you sleep at night. One that doesn’t include X-rays or tests.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, her mischievous grin making him chuckle.

“Actually, we don’t sleep much. Have you noticed that?”

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She tilted her head, pretending to ponder the statement. “You know, you’re right. Maybe we should spend some time apart so we can catch up on our sleep.”

He shook his head slowly, his expression one of mock seriousness. “Never gonna happen.”

She laughed, the sound warm and genuine. She momentarily settled her head against his chest until she said, “It will happen. I need to go back to Virginia. I’ll be handing in my resignation when we do our outbrief, but I have to be cleared and tackle a mountain of paperwork. You’ll probably head off on another mission, right?”

He shook his head again. “Nope. I just talked to Alpha—my boss. The team will be heading back to the States. We were supposed to before the CIA mission, but we’re rotating back now for R&R, training, and re-fitting.”

“Re-fitting?” She frowned slightly, unfamiliar with the term.

“New tools, new equipment, new tech gadgets.” He shrugged, his nonchalance making her grin.

“Oh, that sounds like fun. I’ve always wanted to be on the cutting edge of tech—like your comms. I love the design and nano-engineering of things like that.”

Deacon’s expression softened as he ran his thumb gently over her bottom lip. His voice dropped, a hint of vulnerability lacing his tone. “What exactly are you looking for in a new job?”

Sighing, she leaned into his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breathing. “I’m not really sure what I want to do,” she admitted. “I think I’m going to take a few months to figure it out. I’ve got two months left on my lease in Virginia, and I’m assuming the CIA will want at least a month’s notice. That way, I can train my successor and tackle all that paperwork I mentioned.”

Deacon nodded, listening intently as she continued. “I’ve saved enough to survive in Virginia for six months—if I don’t go crazy, that is. So, I think I’m just going to let myself relax while I consider what I want for my future. Does that sound selfish?” She frowned, biting her lip as she thought about it. “It does, doesn’t it? But you know what? It’s okay to be selfish sometimes, right?” She tilted her head up, looking at him with wide, questioning eyes.

Deacon smiled down at her, his lips twitching in amusement. “Did you just talk yourself all the way around that argument?”

She nodded, a small grin forming. “Yeah, I usually do.”

He shook his head, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. “You’re an amazing woman. Confusing at times, but amazing nonetheless.”

Her grin widened. “That’s always great to hear.” She tilted her head. “What about you? What do you have planned for the future?”

“Training, refitting, R&R,” he said, leaning down to kiss her lips softly. “And I was hoping to spend the R&R part with you.”

She wiggled slightly on the edge of the exam table, her smile teasing. “I’d like that. Can you come to Virginia?”

“In a fucking heartbeat.” His response was immediate, his voice low and serious. He

leaned in and kissed her again, but the sound of the door opening cut them short.

Two nurses and a doctor walked in, the nurses' cheeks pink as they avoided looking directly at the couple. Echo turned, noticing their embarrassment, and waved awkwardly, a sheepish smile on her lips.

The doctor, oblivious or indifferent to the sexual tension, barked out a series of orders in rapid-fire sentences that Echo couldn't understand. Deacon, however, stepped forward and began conversing with the doctor, their low voices blending into the background hum of the hospital. Echo glanced between them, feeling left out of the loop as the discussion continued. Finally, the doctor scribbled something onto her chart, handed it to one of the nurses, and left the room.

Echo turned to Deacon, her brows furrowed. "What the heck just happened?"

Deacon chuckled, stepping back to her side. "He's ordering some blood tests and scans. I think it was X-rays. Or maybe an CT. Honestly, I didn't quite catch it all—this isn't one of my primary languages. It's all as a precaution because he agrees with you. If you've been asymptomatic for this long, you're probably recovered."

"See? The doctor agrees with me." Echo sighed, her stomach grumbling loudly enough to echo in the small room. The nurse prepping the tourniquet and needle chuckled softly before speaking to Deacon. He nodded and replied, the two exchanging a few sentences while the nurse efficiently drew Echo's blood.

"What was that about?" Echo asked, looking at Deacon as he glanced back at her.

"She wanted to know if we'd like something to eat. I told her we would appreciate anything they could scrounge up."

Echo's eyes brightened, and she eagerly nodded, turning back to the nurse and

continuing to nod for emphasis. “Yes, please. Food. Any kind of food would be wonderful.” She paused, her expression twisting into a mock serious look. “Except MREs. I really don’t want another MRE.”

Deacon laughed and translated for the nurse, who chuckled as well. She patted Echo’s arm reassuringly before bandaging the needle site and leaving the room.

Echo was then escorted to the imaging department, Deacon trailing close behind as her translator. The cold, sterile air of the MRI room hit her immediately, sending a shiver down her spine. She lay on the narrow table, earplugs securely in place, and endured the clunking, clanging rhythm of the machine. The noise seemed to go on forever, and the room's chill seeped into her. By the time it was over, she was relieved to step back into the warmth of the hospital hallways.

A heavenly aroma wafted toward them as they returned to the small exam room. The scent of freshly cooked rice, sizzling vegetables, and braised meats filled the air. On a small table sat two trays of food, complete with two cans of soda. Echo’s stomach growled in approval, and she let out a small, satisfied groan.

They sat side by side on the edge of the exam table, eating in comfortable silence. The food was simple but delicious, and Echo savored every bite. She didn’t usually drink soda, but she wasn’t about to complain after weeks of MRE rations.

When the plates were empty, she leaned back with a contented sigh. “I wish I could ask for seconds.”

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Deacon smirked, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “I’d fight you for it.”

Before she could retort, the doctor returned, flipping through her chart and launching into another discussion with Deacon. This time, Deacon paused often, asking for clarification. The doctor slowed his speech and eventually nodded with understanding. He finished with a smile and a wink at Echo before leaving the room.

Deacon turned to her and extended his hand. “You’ve been cleared. There are some microfractures from the CPR, and they might bother you occasionally, but they’ll heal completely.”

Echo let out a relieved breath as she took his hand. “Well, that’s good news.” She smirked. “Now, does this mean I’m officially done with doctors for a while?”

Deacon grinned. “We’ll see. There’s no sign of infection in your body, and your lungs look clear,” Deacon explained as they walked toward the exit. “The doctor said to follow up with a mental health check-up when we get back to the States.”

She stopped in her tracks, tilting her head up to look at him with narrowed eyes. “Mental health?”

“When I explained that you’d drowned, had CPR, and were brought back to life, he indicated that mental health access should be routine. Which,” Deacon added, leveling a steady gaze at her, “I agree with. And no,” he said preemptively, “I didn’t tell him about your night terrors.”

Echo tipped her head back to stare at the ceiling in exasperation. “They’re getting

better,” she muttered defensively.

“You shouldn’t have them at all,” Deacon countered smoothly, his tone calm but unyielding. “It was a traumatic experience.”

She turned her gaze back to him, her brows knitting together. “Which is why you think I need to talk to someone.”

“That’s exactly why. Besides, I know a guy.” His voice softened, but his expression remained resolute.

Echo narrowed her eyes and sighed. “I’m not going to win this argument, am I?”

“Not if you don’t want me to tell the CIA that you’re having night terrors.”

“You wouldn’t.”

He cocked an eyebrow, the hint of a smirk playing on his lips. “Unless you promise me you’ll see someone? I absolutely would.”

Her groan was laced with resignation. “You know a guy, huh?” She folded her arms, narrowing her gaze. “That sounds like some Mafia thing.”

Deacon tilted his head and gave her a slow shrug, his smile turning mischievous. “Maybe. Just don’t eat the cannoli.”

The absurdity of the statement had her bursting into laughter. “Fine,” she conceded, shaking her head. “I’ll see somebody. But it might not be your guy.” She added a mock New York accent to her reply, and his deep chuckle filled the space between them.

He reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers. “That’s all I needed to hear. Let’s get back to the hotel.”

“Are we traveling to Thailand to meet with Flanagan?” she asked as they stepped out of the room.

“No,” Deacon replied. “My boss said the director will be coming here, and he’ll arrive tomorrow.”

They walked toward the nurses’ station, where Deacon exchanged a few words with the nurse behind the counter. She handed him a clipboard, and Deacon pointed to a spot where Echo needed to sign. She scrawled her name on the document, not understanding a single word on the page.

“Talk about trust,” she quipped, glancing up at him. “I could’ve just sold my firstborn.”

Deacon chuckled, his voice warm. “I wouldn’t let that happen. You’re just signing your release and acknowledging the conditions of discharge.”

“Oh, well, if that’s all.” She grinned, laughing as they headed out of the hospital.

Deacon flagged down a taxi, and they climbed into the backseat of the compact vehicle. The space was cramped, but Echo hardly noticed. She was too busy marveling at the city around her. The streets were a sensory overload of noise, people, and vibrant chaos. After over two weeks in the jungle, the sheer volume of humanity pressing into the streets of Pleiku, South Vietnam, was almost overwhelming. Motorbikes weaved through traffic recklessly while street vendors called out in a language she didn’t understand. The tang of spices and smoke from food carts mingled with the acrid scent of exhaust.

She leaned back into the seat, letting it all wash over her. “This is ... a lot,” she said, glancing sideways at Deacon.

He smirked. “A bit different from the jungle, huh?”

“A bit,” she echoed dryly, her lips twitching into a smile as she watched a family of four precariously balanced on a single motorbike zip past their taxi.

Deacon took her hand, his thumb brushing gently over her knuckles. The simple gesture grounded her amid the swirl of the bustling city. She squeezed his hand in return, her lips curving into a quiet smile. Somehow, among the chaos, she found peace sitting beside him.

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“Ah, there’s something I need to tell you.” Deacon shifted uncomfortably beside her.

She tensed immediately. “What?”

“Ronan told me that our parents are here in Pleiku.” He glanced at her and licked his lips. “They want to have dinner with us. You don’t have to go if you don’t want.” He hurried to assure her.

“I’d like to meet your parents. But I’m not going to be very presentable in this.” She waved to her puke-pink scrubs.

Deacon seemed to relax at her answer. Had he been worried she wouldn’t want to meet them? He dropped his arm over her shoulders, and the driver glanced back in the rearview mirror and smiled at her. Obviously, public displays of affection were a rare thing in this country. She smiled back as Deacon said, “My mom has taken care of that. I don’t know how she got your size, but Ronan said clothes were being delivered to the hotel.”

CHAPTER 16

Echo took one last look in the mirror. The tan slacks and V-neck white shirt fit her as if they’d been tailored specifically for her. She wore low-heeled shoes made of butter-soft leather and felt like a princess in a fairy tale. Well, almost. She didn’t have any makeup on, but then again, she rarely wore it. A touch of concealer would’ve been nice—there were shadows under her eyes, but that was to be expected after two weeks in the jungle, right? She tilted her head, studying her reflection, and gave herself a firm nod. Yeah, that was acceptable. She flicked her hair back over her

shoulders and turned, ready for whatever the evening had in store. Tonight, she was going to meet Deacon's parents.

Talking to strangers had never been a problem for her. Hopefully, his mom and dad were down-to-earth people. They were ranchers, right? Deacon had mentioned that his dad owned a spread in Colorado. Horses, cattle, rodeo—she could talk about all of it. Growing up in Bozeman, Montana, she'd been immersed in that way of life. And if conversation failed, well, there was always the weather. Lord knew the monsoons had been a hot topic of discussion lately—or they should have been.

She exited her bedroom into the hotel suite's living area that Guardian had prepared for her. The accommodations exuded luxury. Plush carpets muffled her steps as she moved through the spacious suite. The room held a faint scent of lavender and freshly laundered linens, a stark contrast to the jungle's damp, earthy aroma. Guardian didn't just offer basic; no, they provided premium. Deacon's team had been settled in what could only be described as a bridal suite, complete with three bedrooms, a kitchenette, and two bathrooms. She'd gotten a glimpse of it when they'd first arrived from the hospital, and the banter about their matching scrubs had been equally hilarious and mortifying.

Echo had been relieved to retreat to her own suite and find a wardrobe waiting for her. Everything from casual jeans and sneakers to silk blouses, tailored slacks, and elegant dresses hung neatly in the walk-in closet. She made a mental note to ask Deacon's mother about reimbursing her for the clothes—though, judging by the designer name tags she'd glimpsed, that might take a while.

A knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts. She crossed the room and opened it, her lips curling into a smile. Deacon stood there, looking devastatingly handsome in tailored slacks, a crisp shirt, and what appeared to be a Hermès belt.

"You look really nice," she said, cocking her head to the side. "Is that a Hermès

belt?”

Deacon glanced down at his waist, then back at her with a shrug. “I have no clue. Probably. Is that a bad thing?”

She laughed. “No, it’s a really good thing. It’s a reallyexpensivething.” She emphasized the word with a playful grin. “I have questions. Many questions.”

He shrugged again. “I don’t pay attention to stuff like that and after dinner, I’ll answer what I can.”

She gave him a narrowed look before looping her arm through his. She could wait. Obviously, money was not a foreign thing to him. But how could his parents know where he was? That was the big question of the night and she’d find out, one way or another. But she could wait until after dinner. She changed the subject. “So, how do I look?”

His smile turned wicked as he leaned down and cupped her chin and cheek in his hand. “Completely edible.”

A chill ran down her spine, settling in places that made her knees weak. His lips captured hers, the kiss slow and sensual. By the time he pulled away, she was clinging to his shoulders, breathless and dazed.

“Oh my God,” she panted. “I’m never changing out of this outfit.”

He chuckled, his voice a low rumble. “I think I need you naked.”

She laughed, the sound light and happy. “Okay, maybe I’ll change out of it.”

Just then, another door opened down the hall, and Ronan stepped out of his suite.

Dressed similarly to Deacon, the family resemblance was striking, though subtle differences made it easy to tell them apart. Deacon's chin was squarer, and he was a touch taller. His smile carried a rakish charm, whereas Ronan's was open and warm. Even their hairstyles differed—Ronan's was slightly longer, parted in the middle, while Deacon's was shorter and neatly parted to the side.

"You clean up well, too," Echo said, smiling at Ronan.

He slipped a hand into his pocket and chuckled. "When having dinner with one's mother, one must make an effort."

Deacon rested a hand on the small of her back. "My mother is a wonderful person. She's very talkative but nice."

Echo tilted her head up to look at him, a teasing smile on her lips. "Is that a warning in disguise?"

Ronan laughed. "Yes. Yes, it is. Be afraid. Be very afraid."

Deacon groaned. "You don't need to be afraid of Mom. She's amazing. And you stop that unless you want me to start doing the same to Fleur."

"Who's Fleur?" she asked.

Deacon looked at Ronan and said, "Yeah, who's Fleur?"

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Ronan smiled. The smile told Echo what she wanted to know. Probably his girlfriend. He didn't wear a wedding ring, but then again, most operatives didn't. Fleur could be his wife. They walked together down the hallway, the rich carpet muting their steps. Deacon led the way to a private elevator, where he pulled out a card and tapped it against the reader. A soft chime signaled their ascent to the presidential suite.

They ascended to the top floor of the building in a private elevator. Echo glanced at Deacon and Ronan, her curiosity piqued by the luxurious accommodations. "Man, Guardian sure does put out the bucks for you guys' billets, don't they?"

Both men frowned, exchanging puzzled looks. "What do you mean?" Ronan asked.

"Well," Echo began, "you've got a suite for your team, I've got a suite, and I'm assuming Ronan has one for his team, too. And your parents are in the presidential suite. It's really nice of Guardian to hook them up."

The brothers' confusion deepened, but before either could respond, the elevator doors opened, and Echo's attention was drawn to a striking older woman waiting for them. Her mostly gray hair was pulled back into a practical ponytail, and her warm smile lit up her face. She clapped her hands together in delight before throwing her arms around Deacon, pulling him into a fierce hug. Then, with equal enthusiasm, she wrapped Ronan in her embrace.

"It's so good to see both my boys in the same place at the same time!" she exclaimed, planting a loud kiss on Ronan's cheek, followed by another on Deacon's. Both men rolled their eyes in mock exasperation, but their wide smiles betrayed their happiness.

The woman turned to Echo and extended her hand, her tone cheerful and inviting. “Hi, I’m Anna, the mother of these two.”

Echo took her hand and smiled. Anna wore casual, well-fitted blue jeans, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes. Her athletic build was enviable, and Echo estimated her age to be in her sixties, though she carried herself with the energy and grace of someone much younger.

“Hi, my name is Echo Lashay,” she replied. “I want to thank you so much for ordering all the clothes for me. Everything fits wonderfully. I was wondering if I could repay you for the gesture. I can send a check as soon as I get back to the States.”

Anna blinked in surprise, her gaze flickering between Deacon and Echo. “What a kind offer. Thank you so much, but you know, I don’t think we need to worry about that.” She hooked her arm through Echo’s and began leading her down into the sunken living room of the presidential suite.

Echo was briefly distracted as she absorbed her surroundings. The suite was stunning. The furniture displayed a mix of Oriental influence and modern style, with sleek lines enhanced by rich, warm tones. Plush area rugs softened the hardwood floors, and large windows provided a sweeping view of the city below, with the twinkling lights of the skyline extending to the horizon.

“Wow, this is absolutely amazing,” Echo murmured, turning to Anna. “Guardian really takes care of their people—and their parents—don’t they?”

Anna frowned, clearly confused. “Guardian isn’t paying for our hotel room.” She looked at Deacon and Ronan, her expression seeking clarification.

Echo stopped and turned to Deacon, suspicion creeping into her voice. “Okay, I’m

missing something. What haven't you told me?"

Deacon rubbed the back of his neck, a sheepish look crossing his face. "Uh, my mom and dad have enough money to pay their way. Guardian paid for the suite for my team."

Echo turned to Anna, her eyes wide. "So, then, I owe you for my hotel room?"

Anna shook her head firmly. "No, sweetheart, you don't owe us a thing. Now, let's sit down and visit. I want to know everything there is to know about you, starting with your name. Echo is such an unusual name, but I love it. Tell me the story behind that."

They settled into the plush armchairs by a low coffee table. The warm ambiance of the room perfectly balanced the luxury around them, and Echo felt herself relaxing. Anna's approachable demeanor eased any intimidation the fancy surroundings might have caused.

Echo smiled at her. "Well, my mom and dad were born in the wrong decade. They're hippies and naturalists. Mom has been vegan for as long as I can remember. Dad has never taken a synthesized drug. We live on a forty-acre farm where both my mom and dad work. Mom raises chickens and sells the eggs, has a herd of goats, and makes goat milk soap and candles, which she sells online. Dad grows crops, cans and stores what we use, and sells the rest at the local farmers' market. They're completely off the grid—wind and solar power—and absolutely love their lifestyle."

Anna's eyes sparkled with genuine interest. "They sound like fantastically interesting people," she said. "Where do they live, dear?"

"A little south of Bozeman, Montana," Echo answered. "That's where I grew up."

Anna clutched her chest dramatically. “I grew up in Colorado, and so did the kids. I know Bozeman well! I must take a trip and introduce myself to your parents.”

Echo’s eyes widened as she turned to Deacon. He chuckled. “You know, Mom, that’s probably a bit too quick. Maybe you should wait to be invited?” he suggested cautiously.

Anna waved a dismissive hand, her smile warm and disarming. “You can never have too many friends, darling. Oh, look, here’s your dad.” She rose gracefully and walked over to the gray-haired man who had entered the living area.

Echo’s breath caught for a moment. The resemblance between the older Alexander and his sons was undeniable. Deacon and Ronan were nearly mirror images of their father, sharing the same broad shoulders, sharp bone structure, and commanding presence. Echo couldn’t help but imagine what Deacon might look like in thirty or forty years, and the thought was as reassuring as it was captivating.

Deacon’s father could be in his fifties, sixties, or even older. His age was difficult to determine precisely, but he carried it with such vitality and elegance that it seemed irrelevant. He was a striking man—just like Deacon.

He handed Anna a glass of wine, which she accepted with a soft, grateful smile before leaning in to kiss him. The way he looked at his wife left Echo momentarily speechless. Their love was palpable, as though it had taken physical form and filled the room with its quiet intensity.

Anna turned back to Echo, her voice brimming with pride. “This is my husband, Gabriel.” She gestured toward Echo. “Gabriel, this is Echo Lashay. She’s Deacon’s ... friend?”

Deacon chuckled as he stepped forward and extended his hand to Echo. She stood up

and allowed him to guide her to where his father was standing. “Dad, I’d like you to meet Echo. She’s my girlfriend, and she was my primary on my last mission. She currently works for the CIA.”

Echo extended her hand, grasping Gabriel’s firm yet gentle grip. “It’s wonderful to meet you, sir,” she said.

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“It’s wonderful to meet you, too, Echo,” Gabriel replied. “I’m sorry for hijacking your first night out of the jungle. I’m sure sleep was higher on your list than a social dinner,” he said with a pointed glance at Anna.

Anna swirled her wine glass, the ice clinking softly. “I’m not going to apologize for wanting to see my sons and meet Echo,” she said matter-of-factly.

Echo smiled warmly at Anna. “And there’s no apology needed,” she said.

Anna beamed at her husband, her expression triumphant. “See? I was right.”

Gabriel chuckled and slipped an arm around Anna’s waist. His long-suffering response was a simple, “Yes, dear.”

Deacon and Ronan laughed, clearly accustomed to the affectionate banter between their parents. Gabriel turned his attention back to Echo. “May I get you a drink?”

Echo glanced at Deacon, who smiled reassuringly. “Anything but a purple gin drink, thank you,” she replied with a playful grin.

Gabriel’s brow furrowed slightly in confusion. “I’m sure there’s a story behind that.”

Echo laughed, the memory of that night surfacing. “Oh, yes, sir, there is. When I met Deacon, I was trying to order a drink. Instead, I ended up with more of a purple situation. My Thai is nonexistent, and my English isn’t much better.”

Anna chuckled sympathetically. “Oh, sweetie, me, too. Me, too! I go to all these

events, and my hick accent and use of words is immediately pointed out.”

Echo’s mouth dropped open. “How rude! You don’t put up with that, do you?”

Anna smiled and shook her head. “No, I don’t, and I think I like you very much.”

Gabriel intervened, “So, no purple drinks?” He redirected the conversation, and Echo joined Anna in her laughter. “It did taste good, but not tonight.”

Gabriel smiled and nodded. “That we can do. I promise no purple situations will be found in this hotel room.”

Deacon rested an arm over Echo’s shoulders. “I seem to recall you were a Chardonnay fan?”

“That would be fabulous, thank you,” Echo said, smiling up at him.

Ronan, already heading to the kitchenette, raised a hand in acknowledgment. “I’ve got you. Deacon, the usual?”

“You bet,” Deacon replied as Ronan disappeared.

Anna linked her arm through Echo’s again and steered her back toward the plush couches. “So, tell me about the monsoon,” she said. “I understand you and the team were caught in one.”

Echo frowned, her gaze flicking between Deacon, Gabriel, and Anna. Her instincts, honed by years with the CIA, bristled. “I wasn’t aware civilians knew anything about the mission,” she said cautiously. Her internal alarm bells were ringing; something didn’t add up.

Anna chuckled, patting Echo's arm in a reassuring gesture. "Oh, sweetheart, we're not civilians. Gabriel ran Guardian for many years. As such, I had to have a security clearance and all the briefings that go with knowing everything about everything. You can trust us not to say a word. We still have our clearances, and Gabriel is still brought in every so often."

Deacon frowned, his expression curious and slightly concerned. "What? Dad, I thought you were completely retired. You got pulled back in?"

Gabriel sat down across from Echo and Anna, crossing his legs with an air of casual authority. "Just a phone call now and then," he replied with a nonchalant shrug. "I keep in contact with a couple of people who let me know what's going on."

Deacon chuckled, settling beside Echo on the plush sofa. The living room of the presidential suite exuded understated luxury. The subtle hum of the air conditioning and the faint scent of fresh lilies from an arrangement on the marble coffee table added to the peaceful bliss of the apartment.

"You're nevernotgoing have your fingers in that pie, are you?" Deacon teased. Echo's grin widened as she observed the uncanny resemblance between his father and him. It was almost eerie—the same sharp jawline, penetrating gaze, even the slight tilt of the head when amused.

"She's my baby," Gabriel said with a knowing smirk.

Ronan entered the room, carrying two frosted beer mugs and a glass of Chardonnay. He passed the drinks around and took a seat in a leather armchair. "What are we talking about?"

Deacon tipped his head toward their father. "Dad says he's still in the mix at Guardian. Keeps in contact with a—" he lifted his fingers in air quotes—"a couple of

people.”

Ronan rolled his eyes, his exasperation clear. “Dad, you really do need to retire.”

Anna waved him off. “Oh, hush now. Your dad can do whatever he likes. And if keeping his fingers in the pie helps him relax and enjoy retirement, then let him do it.”

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Ronan turned his gaze to his mother, his expression incredulous. “But you were the one who wanted him to retire.”

“And he did—five or six times.” Anna leaned back with a smile that was both knowing and indulgent.

“I thought he was completely out now,” Ronan sputtered.

“Well, he doesn’t actually go into the office,” Anna explained. “We can travel, and he can still know what’s going on. If he didn’t, he’d be grouchy and a terrible travel partner. It’s just like Frank at the ranch. If he doesn’t stay involved in the running of the place, he’s just going to wither away. You don’t want your father to wither away, do you?” Her gaze sharpened as it flicked between her sons.

Deacon sighed, closing his eyes briefly. “Mother, I don’t need a guilt trip. Dad can do whatever he chooses. We were just surprised to learn he’s still involved. From all accounts, he wasn’t the last time we talked.”

Anna turned to Echo with a conspiratorial smile. “They aren’t very observant, are they? You’ll have to forgive them. They’re always so focused on themselves. It’s a fault I somehow allowed when they were growing up.”

Echo laughed and glanced at Deacon, her smile softening. “I don’t think it’s a fault—at least not with this one,” she said, her tone affectionate. “I’ve never had anyone take care of me as well as Deacon has over the last three weeks. From what I’ve seen, he looks after his team, and they look after him. So, the fault isn’t being self-centered. Perhaps the fault lies in not listening to their parents as well as they

should?”

Anna smiled triumphantly and aimed a pointed look at both men.

Deacon groaned and leaned back. “For a minute there, I thought you were on my side,” he joked. He turned to his mother. “Mom, I’m sorry if we didn’t listen closely enough. I was under the impression Dad had fully retired.”

Gabriel’s gaze was steady as he replied, “Son, I raised that organization from its infancy. I’ll always be connected. I won’t be responding, and I probably won’t be leading any efforts. But I’ll know what’s going on, and I’ll know what my children are doing. Call it a personality flaw.” He winked at Anna, who chuckled softly.

A ring from the private elevator interrupted the moment, and Gabriel stood as Anna laughed. “That would be dinner. We figured you wouldn’t want to go out. A nice, quiet dinner in the hotel room seemed better.”

Echo exhaled, sinking into Deacon’s side. “Thank you so much. It’s been a long day.” She sipped her Chardonnay, her eyes widening as the smooth flavor hit her palate. “Oh my goodness, this is delicious. I don’t think I’ve ever had a wine this smooth.” She looked up at Deacon. “Could you get me the name of this wine so I can get some when I return to Virginia?”

“Absolutely,” Deacon said as he rose to help his father direct the waitstaff.

It took several minutes for the staff to arrange everything on the dining table. The smell of rich sauces, roasted meats, and fresh herbs filled the suite. Anna leaned toward Echo as the finishing touches were placed. “So,” she whispered, “this thing between you and Deacon—is it serious? I’m whispering because I’d be flayed alive if he knew I was asking.”

Echo chuckled as Anna took another sip of her red wine. Lowering her voice, Echo added, “It’s serious to me.”

Anna’s eyes twinkled, her smile widening. “Good. He’s a sweetheart under all that gruffness.” Anna looked down into her glass. Echo noted the ice cubes swirling in the wine—a detail that struck her as utterly bizarre yet oddly charming. Knowing her parents, who were the epitome of weird, she took the ice cube incident in stride.

“We want to see where it’s going,” Echo whispered to Anna, her voice soft with a vulnerability she rarely displayed. “There’s a connection, and it’s strong. But the way we met and everything that happened during the mission is causing ... I think both of us have some concerns. What we feel is intense, and right now, it’s powerful. But when we return to the real world, that will be tested.” She shook her head, glancing down at her wine. The dim lighting in the suite made the golden liquid shimmer. “I really hope that what we feel grows stronger.” Looking up, she met Anna’s kind, knowing eyes and smiled sadly. “He’s an amazing man. I’ve seen both sides of him: the fierce team leader protecting his people, leading his team, and making sure I was safe. And I’ve seen the gentleman you raised—caring, gentle, and loving. He’s two sides of the same coin, and ...” She hesitated, swallowing hard. “... I could easily fall in love with him.”

She already was helplessly in love with him. But she wasn’t about to admit that to his mother before she told Deacon himself.

Anna inhaled deeply, her hand finding Echo’s arm with a comforting squeeze. “Oh, sweetheart, I know my boys. When they find the one, they’ll hold on tight. You have nothing to worry about.” Anna blinked quickly, her misting eyes betraying her emotions. “I’m so happy for him. He’s the last of my babies to find someone he could spend the rest of his life with.”

Echo’s lips curved into a grateful smile. “Thank you. I hope it works out.”

Anna patted her arm gently, her voice warm and full of conviction. “It will, my dear. I promise you it will. Now, let’s go have some dinner.”

Two hours later, Echo stifled yet another yawn, but the combination of excellent food, wonderful wine, and the lingering exhaustion from her time in the jungle was impossible to fight. Deacon noticed instantly, his arm finding its familiar place around her shoulders. He leaned down, his voice soft and intimate. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, unable to hide her relief. Turning to Anna and Gabriel, Deacon said, “We’re out of here. It’s been a long day, and we need some sleep.”

Ronan rolled his eyes with a sly grin. “Sleep, right? Yeah, that’s what you’re gonna do.”

Anna scoffed in mock outrage. “Ronan Alexander, do not make me go find a switch!”

Ronan held up his hands, laughing. “Promise, Mom, I promise.”

Gabriel and Anna walked them to the door. Anna hugged Echo tightly, her warmth and sincerity unmistakable. “It was so nice to meet you. Hopefully, when we’re back in the States, we can get together often.”

“That sounds nice. But right now, I live in Virginia, so the distance could be a factor.” Echo laughed softly, although the thought of staying in touch with Anna truly appealed to her.

Anna snorted playfully. “Sweetheart, we have a place in Virginia. Just let me know when you’re free from that CIA job, and we’ll go out for lunch. We’ll take a car, so we can have wine while we chat.” She looked at her husband, her brow raised expectantly. “That would be okay with you, right?”

Gabriel looked at her over his glass of bourbon, his smile indulgent. “Anything you want, my dear. Absolutely anything you want.” He leaned down, pressing a kiss to her temple.

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Watching them, Echo felt a pang of longing. The way Gabriel looked at Anna, and how their love seemed to radiate between them, was exactly what she desired with Deacon. She glanced up at him and found him gazing at her with an expression so tender it took her breath away. Maybe, just maybe, they already had it.

As the elevator doors closed, Echo leaned into Deacon. “Your mom is an amazing and wonderful woman.”

Ronan snorted beside her. “My mom is really a handful,” he said with a laugh. “But yeah, we love her. She’s always been therefor us and for Dad. She’s a source of strength and a true force of nature.”

The reverence in his tone was unmistakable. Then, almost absentmindedly, Ronan added, “That’s what I want for Fleur and me.”

Echo’s eyes widened in surprise, and she turned to look at Ronan. “Who’s that? You mentioned her before.”

“My lady, Fleur Buchanan,” he said simply, his voice softening. “We met on a mission in Syria. She was working at an NGO camp. An NGO is?—”

“Non-governmental organization,” Echo interjected. “Yeah, I got that. What was she doing in Syria? Was she working at the refugee camps?”

Ronan nodded. “Exactly. Only this one had several issues, most of which were made worse by some major criminals who’d worked their way into the camp leadership. She’s back in the States now, taking over running the administrative end supporting

the nonprofit organizations and charities Guardian contributes to. It's a substantial amount of work, but she's learning it. Mom used to oversee everything, Gabby took it over, and now, Fleur has the helm."

They walked down the hotel's quiet, lushly carpeted hallway, the muted lighting casting a soft glow on the dark wood-paneled walls. The rich scent of polished wood and fresh-cut flowers lingered in the air, starkly contrasting the damp jungle they'd left behind. The trio stopped in front of Ronan's door.

"What time is the outbrief tomorrow?" Ronan asked, his hand resting on the doorknob.

Deacon glanced at his watch and let out a deep yawn, his exhaustion evident. "Zero-eight hundred, which means we need to turn in and get some sleep. When I say it's been a long day, I mean it's been a long motherfucking day."

Echo looked up at him, her own weariness reflected in her eyes, and nodded. "All right, how about we hook up for lunch?" Ronan suggested.

"Sounds like a plan." Deacon pulled his brother into a brief, brotherly hug, slapping his back affectionately. "See you then."

Ronan nodded and disappeared into his suite, the soft click of the door closing behind him. Deacon and Echo continued down the hallway to her room, the quiet hum of the hotel almost lulling them to sleep right there. Echo handed him her keycard, and he slid it into the reader, opening the door with a faint beep. He paused at the doorway, glancing at her as she stepped inside.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked, turning to face him.

He stepped inside, closing the door firmly and sliding the bolt into place. "I wasn't

joking,” he said, his tone half-serious, half-playful. “We really do need to sleep. And we don’t seem to do much of that when we’re in the same bed.”

Echo yawned so wide her jaw cracked, shaking her head as she stretched. “I’m so tired right now. Sleep is the only thing I’m going to do. You’re welcome to come with me. Sleep. That’s it.” Her words ended in another yawn, followed by a whole-body shiver, making Deacon chuckle softly.

“Fine, you’ve convinced me,” he said, his voice low and warm as he followed her into the room. The suite was dimly lit, the thick curtains drawn against the city lights outside. The room’s soft beige tones were soothing, with plush bedding on the king-sized bed and a faint lavender scent from the hotel’s signature linen spray.

Echo wasted no time removing her clothes and tossing them onto a chair before sinking into the cool, inviting sheets. Deacon followed suit, folding his slacks and shirt with the practiced efficiency of someone accustomed to packing quickly. He slipped into bed behind her, pulling her back against his chest as she adjusted her pillow.

His arms wrapped around her securely. His warmth next to her felt familiar, safe, and so right. She sighed, contented, and relaxed for the first time that day. He adjusted his legs, aligning their bodies perfectly, and kissed the top of her head.

Safe, warm, and enveloped in his arms, it took only moments before Echo drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 17

Deacon and Echo walked down the hallway toward the conference room where Flanagan was waiting. The plush carpeting muffled their footsteps, and the polished wood-paneled walls reflected the soft, ambient lighting of the upscale hotel. Once

again, two men stood as silent sentinels outside the door. Their suits were immaculate, and their postures rigid. Deacon handed over his cell phone without a word. Echo didn't have one to surrender—her device had been lost during the flood or somewhere between the mountain's bottom and top.

The door opened, revealing a sleek, minimalist conference room. A long mahogany table dominated the space, surrounded by high-backed leather chairs—the faint aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the clean scent of the air conditioning. Supervisory Officer Timothy Flanagan rose as they entered, extending his hand to Echo and then Deacon.

“Coffee?” Flanagan offered.

“Oh, God, yes,” Echo said with a weary smile as she approached the sideboard where a tray of coffee, cream, and sugar awaited. She glanced back at Deacon, who offered her a subtle nod. They would've been late for the meeting if Click hadn't checked on him this morning. The man's voice had startled him awake. He looked at the clock and roused Echo. Neither of them had set an alarm, and it was seven-thirty when Click had reached out to him. They'd had thirty minutes to shower and get ready to meet Flanagan, which meant they could only use the instant brew pod coffee in the room.

Pouring two cups of black coffee, Echo returned to the table, set one in front of him, then sank into the chair beside him. She blew on her coffee before taking a tentative sip, the steam curling upward. She sighed in appreciation of the flavor before leaning forward again. “Were we able to save the officers in question?” Echo asked, her voice steady but her eyes searching. She raised an eyebrow, waiting for Flanagan's response.

The officer's face turned somber. “Yes, all but one. We have no information on his location or status.”

Echo deflated beside Deacon, her shoulders sagging as she set her cup down. Closing her eyes, she rubbed her forehead. “Is that a result of the equipment theft or the time it took us to recover it?”

“Honestly, we can’t say either event influenced it,” Flanagan admitted. “The officer hadn’t been in contact before the equipment was stolen, so there’s no way to link his disappearance to either event. Since he was working in Syria and with the government collapse, we’re assuming recent regional instability could have played a role in his disappearance. We’ve sent someone in to look for him.”

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Deacon leaned back, his jaw tightening. The government in Syria had crumbled over the past six months, leaving chaos in its wake. He was grateful that Fleur and Ronan had escaped the country before the collapse, and he took comfort in knowing Ronan would soon be taking a safer position within Guardian. The Middle East was a volatile region of conflict, and Ronan's team had faced more than their share of danger.

Flanagan leaned forward, tapping a small recording device on the table. "I'm going to take your debrief now. It will be recorded." He looked at Echo, who nodded, and then at Deacon, who gave a nonchalant shrug. Deacon had already told Echo he wouldn't add anything to her debrief unless absolutely necessary.

Flanagan pressed the button. "This is Supervisory Officer Timothy Flanagan. I am conducting a debriefing with Officer Echo Lashay and Guardian employee Deacon Alexander concerning Mission X2379. Officer Lashay, could you please start from the beginning and walk us through the mission without leaving out any details?"

Echo took another sip of her coffee, her expression unreadable, before launching into her report.

Flanagan turned off the recorder three hours later and leaned back in his chair. He looked at the two of them with an expression that was equal parts admiration and sympathy. "You two have been through hell."

Deacon leaned forward. "Actually, sir, she went through hell. My team and I have been through worse missions."

Flanagan nodded, his gaze settling on Echo. “I can assure you I’ll do everything in my power to ensure the CIA doesn’t sideline you again and takes your recommendations seriously.”

Echo smiled faintly. “Sir, with all due respect, I’d like to give you this. Sorry it isn’t typed, but I didn’t have a printer or computer.” She reached into her back pocket, producing an envelope, and slid it across the table.

Flanagan took it, his expression darkening as he anticipated its contents. “Please tell me this isn’t your resignation.”

Echo nodded. “Yes, sir, it is. I’m giving one month’s notice. That should allow enough time for me to return to Virginia, tie up loose ends in my position, and complete the paperwork. I’m within my rights to quit at any time.”

Flanagan sighed, holding the envelope as if it were heavier than it looked. “I’ll forward this to your superiors. I wish I could convince you to stay.” He turned to Deacon. “Are you offering her a job?”

Deacon shook his head. “No, she knows Guardian is always hiring quality people, but that’s not her focus right now.”

The room fell silent for a moment, the weight of the discussion hanging heavy in the air. Echo glanced at Deacon. He could see that her resolve was firm. This was her decision, and she would make the right one.

Flanagan leaned forward, his expression a mix of curiosity and admiration. “What exactly is your intent?”

Echo smiled softly, a flicker of determination in her eyes. “To figure out what I’m going to do with my life now that I’ve been given a second chance.” She shrugged

lightly. “I can tell you this—it’s not going to be sitting in an office with people who are bored to death and hate their jobs.”

Flanagan chuckled, a warm sound from the all-business officer. “I can’t say I blame you.” He glanced at a notepad on the table before nodding firmly. “I’ll arrange transportation for you back to Virginia.”

Deacon shook his head. “There’s no need, sir. We have transport scheduled for tomorrow. She’ll be traveling with my and my brother’s teams. We’ll get her back to the States, and I’ll ensure she arrives in Virginia safely.”

Flanagan paused to consider this for a moment before nodding again. “That works for me.” He stood, his demeanor shifting to one of formal respect. “Echo,” he said, extending his hand. “Thank you for your service. You could’ve told us to take ahike, and the officers you saved would have remained in serious danger. You deserve a medal for what you’ve done. In fact, I plan to submit you for one.”

Echo shook his hand. “Sir, I didn’t do this for a medal. I did it because it was the right thing to do. No award means more to me than knowing those people—except for the one still missing—are alive and well.”

Flanagan’s face softened. “We’re surely going to miss you, Echo.” He released her hand and turned to Deacon, clasping his firmly. “Tell Jason I said hello.”

“Will do,” Deacon replied, his tone even as he placed a protective hand on the small of Echo’s back, guiding her toward the door.

Deacon retrieved his wallet and cell phone from the security checkpoint as they exited the conference room. They walked down the hallway, their footsteps echoing faintly in the quiet space.

“How did that feel?” Deacon asked, glancing at her.

Echo shrugged, a wry smile tugging at her lips. “Good, but weird at the same time. I know I’ll have to find another job, but right now, all I want to do is step away from the CIA and figure out what I really want. If I have to take out a loan and return to school, I’ll do it.” She paused and then laughed, the sound mixing humor and exasperation. “Part of me thinks my mom and dad have the right idea—living off the grid and off the land.” She burst into another round of laughter, shaking her head. “Oh, God, who am I kidding? I couldn’t do it. I love tech too much. But maybe something remote, like working from home? Transcription, perhaps?” She cringed. “No, I’d be bored to death. I’ll find something.”

Deacon chuckled beside her, the sound warm and reassuring. “I never did ask—what’s your degree in?”

She glanced up at him, her expression brightening. “Nanotechnology. That’s why your comm devices fascinate me so much. I’d love to take one apart and learn how to re-engineer it. Don’t get me wrong, they’re great, but all that tapping on the ear is a dead giveaway. There has to be a way to end the conversation or mute the comms vocally.” She paused, tilting her head thoughtfully. “But I guess that’s something for your people to figure out.”

When the elevator door opened, Deacon pulled her gently inside, wrapping his arms around her waist. His gaze was steady and earnest. “Or you could do that for Guardian. My uncle, also my boss, has already run your background. He’s adamant that if you want to join Guardian, there’s a place for you.”

Echo’s brows lifted slightly, and she considered his words. “It’s something to think about,” she admitted. “But we’d need to get to that point first. If I were to join Guardian, this thing between us would need to be more ... permanent. I wouldn’t want to work at the same agency as someone I used to date. That could get messy. I’ve

never dated within the CIA, and ...” She trailed off, her voice softening. “It’s just a little early, don’t you think?”

Deacon shook his head, his expression unwavering. “No, I don’t think. I told you, I’m in this. There are feelings involved—deep feelings. At least on my side. As far as I’m concerned, there will never be a used-to-datescenario between us.”

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand. He had to prove to her he was serious. Yeah, he said he’d give her time, but he wasn’t going to allow her to start to doubt what was between them. They stepped off the elevator and walked down the hall, passing the suite where his team was staying. When they reached her room, Echo handed him her keycard, and he opened the door, pausing in the doorway.

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She turned to him and ran her hands up his chest and around his neck. “Just over three weeks isn’t very long to base a relationship.”

He shook his head. “You’re wrong. Just over three weeks of living in each other’s pocket, going through the landslide of emotions?—”

She interrupted, “And a real landslide. God, that was unbelievable.”

He smiled. “Add to that parachuting into the heart of Laos, discovering a cartel camp deep in the jungle, stealing a device that was taken from your organization, experiencing a flash flood, leading to you going under that water.” He refused to say dying again and quickly added, “Also, a firefight or two, the trek up the mountain, and then over it to the exfil location only to end our time with helicopter crashes and you meeting my family. Echo, we’ve lived more in three weeks than most people do their entire lives.”

She blinked and then smiled up at him. “We have done all of that, haven’t we?”

He nodded. “I think I would’ve noticed if we weren’t compatible. So would’ve you.” He lowered to kiss her just as someone knocked on the door behind them. He shook his head and continued his mission to sample the addictive taste of his woman. A harder knock pulled them apart.

“I know you’re in there, Deacon,” Ronan’s voice called from the hall.

Deacon turned and opened the door. Nine pairs of eyes stared back at them. “The guys found an awesome restaurant. We have reservations. Come on, I’m starving.”

“Be right there,” Deacon said and closed the door. “I’m starving, too, but not for food.”

“I heard that!” Ronan yelled from the other side of the door. “Come on, man! We have reservations.”

“I don’t care!” Deacon yelled back, which sent Echo into a fit of giggles. “Well, hell, that blew the moment, didn’t it?” He stared down at her, smiling as she laughed. “Are you ready?”

“With you by my side, I’m ready for anything.” She opened the door and raised her arms. “Hello, boys. Take me to your foodstuffs!”

They laughed in unison as Deacon exited the suite and shut the door behind him. Ronan walked with him as Echo and the guys traded one-liners. “She fits in. You found a good one.”

Deacon smiled broadly as Ace groaned and then grinned, dodging a half-hearted swipe from Bandit. She’d clearly outsmarted Ace with something she’d said, and Bandit was all over that shit like stink on a skunk. Ranger and Wraith chuckled as Bandit chased Ace to the stairwell. The laughter of the men echoing down the stairs was lighthearted. Echo ran to the door, flung it open, and yelled, “Charge!”

Every single one of their men dashed behind her down the stairs. It was twenty floors to the bottom. Deacon pressed the elevator button. He would let the younger ones run ahead. Ronan clearly agreed as he remained beside Deacon. He turned to his brother and smiled. “Yeah, she’s perfect.” And she was.

CHAPTER 18

Echo expected a transport aircraft, something utilitarian with jump seats and cargo

nets. What she didn't expect was to ride on a commercial plane; she certainly didn't expect to be flown back to the United States in such luxury. The pod-style layout of the business and first-class sprawled luxuriously before her. She tried not to act like she'd never flown first class before—but then again, she hadn't.

As she approached her assigned pod, she marveled at its sleek design. The soft, oversized seat resembled a recliner, complete with controls to fully recline into a bed. There was a personal entertainment screen, noise-canceling headphones, and even a small storage compartment. She glanced down the other aisle and caught Deacon's amused smirk as he settled into his seat across from her. He dropped the privacy shield between their pods, leaning slightly toward her.

"I've never been in first class before," she whispered excitedly, her eyes sparkling.

Deacon chuckled, his broad shoulders shaking. "Well, it's about time we fixed that."

She observed as Ronan and his team positioned themselves on the right side of the plane, while Deacon's team took up the left. Other passengers filled the remaining pods toward the front, but the camaraderie between the two teams made the atmosphere feel more like a private charter.

Echo's curiosity got the best of her. She began pressing buttons, adjusting the seat, and exploring the entertainment system. She was still discovering when a flight attendant approached, offering a glass of champagne. The long-stemmed flute sparkled in the soft cabin lighting as she accepted it. Deacon reached for his glass as well, and with a shared smile, they clinked their glasses and kissed gently. No words were exchanged, nor were they necessary.

In Echo's opinion, the connection between them spoke volumes. Did she love him? Yes. Absolutely. Would she tell him now? Absolutely not. Relationships were a balancing act, and she wasn't about to upset the equilibrium by saying it too soon.

She glanced at him, his profile strong and calm, and felt a warmth settle over her.

The flight attendants were attentive to a fault, continuously offering snacks, meals, desserts, and even cookies. Echo felt pampered, especially when one brought her a neatly wrapped set of pajamas. She held them up and looked at Deacon, who smirked.

“Are you going to change into pajamas?” she asked, holding the soft cotton in front of her.

He laughed and shook his head. “No. I’ll sleep in my clothes.”

Echo raised her eyebrows. “I think I’m going to put them on.”

He waved her toward the first-class bathrooms. “Go for it.”

She returned a few minutes later, her clothes folded neatly in her arms, wearing soft, heather-gray pajamas. The team chuckled as she paraded back to her seat, her steps light with delight. She extended her seat into a bed and propped herself up on the pillow.

“I could get used to a life like this,” she murmured, looking over at Deacon with a playful smile. His eyebrows lifted in amusement. “Don’t worry, I won’t ask you to pay for my luxuries,” she added quickly, waving her hand dismissively. “But really, anyone could get used to this.”

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Deacon chuckled and shook his head. She knew she was practical to a fault. She was already planning how to make the most of what she'd saved. Sue her, she was raised to be frugal, and it had stuck.

"Are you going to sleep?" she asked, yawning as the thought overtook her.

"Not right now," he said. "You go ahead. It's a long flight home."

With a nod, she closed her eyes, sinking into the plush bedding. The low rumble of the aircraft, combined with the soft hum of activity from the flight attendants, created a soothing background noise. Sleep came easily after the marathon of emotions and physical exertion the previous night.

Echo enjoyed the fact that first class was first to disembark. Although their accommodations were fantastic, the flight was extraordinarily long, and she was happy to walk and stretch her legs. As they entered the airport in San Francisco, they pooled together, waiting for the rest of the team members to make it down the gangway. Deacon dropped his arm over her shoulders when all the phones for every man on both teams rang simultaneously. Deacon looked at his phone and then clicked his earpiece, along with the others. He said, "Cobra One, online." All the other men checked in as well.

Sensing this was not a casual call, as one, the men stepped to the side, letting other passengers disembark without disrupting the flow. Deacon stood still, his jaw tight, eyes closed briefly. Whatever news had come through the synchronized team calls wasn't good. Echo watched him, her own thoughts temporarily distracted by the small communication device in his ear. The earpiece was impressive—able to

transmit and receive—but as she studied it, she couldn't help but think how easily it could be retrofitted for vocal commands, given it already housed a microphone.

Deacon's sharp movement pulled her focus back. He snapped his attention in her direction and asked one clipped question. "When?"

The slump of his broad shoulders told her the answer was immediate. "Roger, copy," he said into the device, his voice low and tense. He clicked off his earpiece and turned to her, extending his hand. His grip was firm yet gentle as he led her farther down the terminal, weaving through the crowd until they reached a small nook tucked away from the bustling travelers.

"We have to go," he said, his tone apologetic but resolute. "Both teams. I don't know how long I'll be gone, Echo. I wanted to take you all the way to Virginia. I wanted to spend more time with you."

She shook her head, her fingers lifting to his cheek as her touch softened his expression. "I know who you are, Deacon. I know what you do. I'm a big girl. I can make it back to Virginia on my own." Her voice was steady, but the hint of sadness in her eyes betrayed her. "When you can, come to me. I'll be waiting. And if you can't send word, I'll understand. I know it's not always possible. I'll be watching the news, wondering where you are and the difference you're making. Because I know it'll be something good, something that matters."

He cupped her face, his thumb brushing her cheek as his eyes locked onto hers. "Echo, I think I'm in love with you."

Her lips parted, but his finger pressed gently against them before she could respond. "No, you don't have to say anything. I didn't mean to scare you. I just ... I need you to know how serious I am about us. If I can't contact you, it doesn't mean I don't want to. And if weeks or months go by, I'll reach out as soon as possible."

She nodded, her eyes shining with unspoken emotion. Then, with a cheeky grin, she licked his finger, causing him to jerk it back in surprise. She laughed softly. “Deacon, I feel the same way. It’s too soon and terrifying, but the feelings I have—what I feel in here”—she placed her hands over her heart—“could very well be love. Go with your team. Do what you need to do. I’ll be here. I’ll wait for you.”

She paused, her lips curving into a small smile. “Well, not here. Back in Virginia. Do you have my address?”

He chuckled, the tension in his face easing slightly. “I’ll get it. There’s not much Guardian can’t find out.”

“No doubt.” She stood on her toes to press a gentle kiss to his lips. “Take care of yourself. Remember, you have to come back to me.”

“I will,” he promised. With one last lingering kiss, he turned and walked away, his shoulders squared with determination.

Exactly thirty-two days later, Echo stepped out of the nondescript government building she’d worked in for far too long. In her hands, she carried a small cardboard box filled with trinkets and keepsakes accumulated during her time with the CIA. Of course, the box had been thoroughly searched and scanned before she was allowed to leave. Trust wasn’t exactly the agency’s forte.

She shook her head with a wry laugh, the reality of her freedom sinking in. A sleek black limousine pulled up to the curb in front of her, its polished surface gleaming in the late afternoon sun. She stopped, frowning as the imposing vehicle blocked her path. The back window rolled down, and to her surprise, Anna Alexander leaned out, waving enthusiastically.

“Congratulations on your last day of work!” Anna’s bright voice cut through Echo’s

confusion. She opened the door and climbed out, striding over to Echo with open arms. Before Echo could react, Anna hugged her tightly, squishing the cardboard box between them.

“How did you know?” Echo asked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

Anna made a dismissive sound and waved toward the limo. “Girl, there are no secrets from me. Deacon texted me and told me today was your last day, so I thought I’d plan a nice dinner at our house to celebrate.”

Echo blinked. “Well, that’s very kind. I can follow you in my car.”

“Oh, no, no, no.” Anna shook her head firmly. “Just come with me. We’ll get your car to the house, or we’ll bring you back to it later. Either way, you’re riding with me. That way, we can talk.”

There was no arguing with Anna Alexander, and Echo knew it. With a resigned smile, she slid into the plush interior of the limousine, placing her box carefully on the floor. She scooted over to make room as Anna climbed in after her. The privacy window between the front and back was down, and Echo noted the driver and another figure she couldn’t identify. Anna reached forward and pressed a button, raising the screen.

The air in the limo was rich with the scent of leather and faint traces of Anna’s floral perfume. As the vehicle pulled away, Anna turned to Echo with a wide smile. “Now, let’s talk.”

Echo pointed toward the privacy screen separating the front of the limo and asked, “Why do you have two drivers?”

Anna smiled warmly, her laugh light. “Oh, he’s not my driver. He’s my bodyguard.”

“Bodyguard? You need a bodyguard?” Echo blinked, her brow furrowed as she tried to reconcile the cheerful, down-to-earth Anna with someone who required professional protection. “Are you that rich?”

Anna laughed and shook her head. “Sweetheart, I can honestly tell you I don’t know how much money my husband has. I don’t care. We could lose everything tomorrow, and I would still be by his side every step of the way. Money isn’t a factor.”

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Echo nodded slowly. “Yeah, I get that. But ... why do you need a bodyguard?”

Anna rolled her eyes with exaggerated flair. “I don’t, not really. But Gabriel insists. He believes that people like us—those connected to Guardian—can sometimes be targeted. So, if having a bodyguard makes him happy, I’m happy to let him think he’s protecting me.” She grinned conspiratorially. “You should pity the man, though. He’s spent more time in boutique shops and grocery stores than any other operative in Guardian’s history. Lucky for him, he gets paid very well.”

“He works for Guardian?” Echo’s curiosity piqued.

Anna nodded. “Yes, he does. Everyone on our security detail does. It’s part of the job description for being married to Gabriel Alexander.”

Anna’s tone shifted as she asked, “When was the last time you heard from Deacon?”

Echo’s shoulders dropped slightly at the question. “A week ago. Click called to say Deacon was alive and doing well. They’re closing in on wrapping up the mission, but there’s no definitive extraction timeline yet. I’ve been watching the news,” she admitted, flicking her gaze toward Anna. “I think I have a pretty good idea where they are.”

Anna shook her head with a quick wave of her hand. “I stopped watching the news a long time ago, specifically because of where my boys work. I don’t want to know what kind of messes they’re stepping into, so please, don’t tell me.” Her smile softened. “I’m spoiled because I have Gabriel. He’s connected to everyone at Guardian, so if there’s an issue, we’ll know immediately. And trust me, if there were

any problems with Deacon, I'd come straight to you."

Echo's heart swelled with gratitude. "Thank you so much, Anna. Inviting me to dinner was incredibly kind. You didn't have to do that."

Anna waved off the sentiment with a laugh. "Oh, nonsense. I'm making a huge Prime Rib with fresh bread, mashed potatoes, gravy, and roasted vegetables. I love to cook, especially for a big gathering."

"Big?" Echo blinked at her hostess.

"Not too big. Gabrielle and her husband, Connor, are here. Charley and her husband, Dan, are here, too. I'm not sure about Fleur. I haven't seen her yet. Anyway, I figured this was the perfect opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: Celebrate you leaving the CIA and let you meet the rest of the family." She tilted her head. "Gabriel said it was a celebration. He told me leaving that job means you'll start doing something you truly want to do. So, tell me, what do you want to do?"

Echo laughed nervously. "You know, I'm not entirely sure. I just knew I didn't want to keep doing that job. So, yes, it is a celebration, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about the next six months."

"Six months?" Anna raised an eyebrow.

"That's how long my savings will last," Echo admitted. "I figure that's enough time to decide what I want to do and start hunting down potential employers."

Anna nodded with understanding. "I can see why that would make you anxious. There was a time when I was living on a shoestring budget, too. I made leather goods—belts, saddles, bridles, that sort of thing. It was hard work, but it paid what little bills I had. Back then, I was living away from Gabriel."

Echo tilted her head, intrigued. "How did you meet Gabriel?"

Anna's eyes twinkled as she leaned back into the plush leather seat. "Oh, that's a long story. It involves old friends of ours, Deacon and Jacqueline. Deacon—yes, the one your Deacon is named after—and Jacqueline were attacked, and Jacqueline was left for dead. I was her nurse at the time. That's my occupation—I'm a registered nurse. I've kept my certifications up all these years. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

Anna's smile turned wistful. "I met Gabriel while taking care of Jacqueline in Colorado. Later, Jacqueline moved to New Orleans, and the serial killer who thought he'd finished her off tried again. In the process, Gabriel was injured.

"Long story short, Gabriel had to go away, and I was threatened. I was also pregnant with our first. I felt it was necessary to disappear. I didn't want to bring any danger to Gabriel, and I believed the threats I received." Anna sighed, her gaze softening as she recalled the past. "So, I hid out in Wyoming in the middle of nowhere. Gabriel searched for me and found me just after I'd had Gabby."

She smiled wistfully, then added, "Someday, when we're sitting down with a glass of wine, I'll tell you the whole story. It could fill a novel." Anna chuckled, and Echo shook her head in amazement.

"Wow. And I thought the way I met Deacon was unusual."

Anna laughed. "You know, loving a Guardian isn't easy. But it's worth it."

Echo didn't respond aloud, but she smiled warmly. She wasn't ready to tell anyone—let alone Anna—that she loved Deacon before she told him. But she did. The last thirty-two days without him had proven how deeply she needed him in her life. She'd been turning it over in her mind: If Deacon continued to work on the teams but came home to her whenever he could, she could live with that. It wouldn't

be the ideal of having him home every night, but she knew how much he loved his work. He could have both—her and his career.

Maybe she'd look into Guardian to see if there was a position for her in her field. She didn't want Deacon to pull any strings. She'd jump at the chance if she could earn the job on her own merit.

The limo pulled up about twenty-five minutes later in front of a stunning colonial mansion. The house was a picture of elegance, with pristine white columns, black shutters, and a sweeping front porch. The grounds were immaculately landscaped, with neatly trimmed hedges and flower beds that looked like they belonged in a magazine. Echo let out a low whistle as they rolled into the long horseshoe driveway.

As the wrought iron gates closed behind them, she noticed another man patrolling the property. So, not only does Anna have a bodyguard, but her estate is patrolled, Echo thought, her eyebrows raising. She was definitely going to have a serious talk with Deacon—his parents were far wealthier than she'd realized.

The bodyguard opened the car door for Anna, who hopped out with ease. Echo hesitated, glancing at her small box of belongings. "I'd leave that there," Anna said breezily. "We'll get it to your house later unless there's something you need right now?"

Echo looked at the box, filled with staplers, tape dispensers, and half-used calendars. None of it seemed necessary for dinner, so she shook her head and left it behind.

As they walked into the mansion's grand foyer, Echo was immediately struck by its timeless beauty. Marble floors gleamed under the crystal chandelier hanging above, and the walls were adorned with tastefully framed artwork. It felt both opulent and welcoming, a home built with love and care.

A woman who bore a striking resemblance to Anna strode across the floor. She extended her hand with a friendly smile. "Hi, I'm Charley. I'm Deacon's little sister."

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Echo shook her hand and grinned. "The brave one."

Charley laughed, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm surprised he didn't say 'the crazy one.'"

Echo tilted her head and smiled knowingly. "He did. He absolutely did."

Charley pointed a finger at her, feigning outrage. "I knew it! Of course, he did. I have got to talk to that brother of mine." Turning to Anna, she asked, "When's Deacon coming home?"

Anna shrugged. "I'm sure you can talk to him when he gets back."

Charley shook her head dramatically. "I'm not crazy. I've been tested."

Echo laughed. "Well, I'm glad to hear that."

Charley looped her arm through Echo's. "Come on, I'll introduce you to my husband, my sister, and her husband. Mom, do you need help in the kitchen?"

Anna waved her off as she headed in another direction. "I've got this!"

Charley led Echo into a stunning living room, complete with floor-to-ceiling windows, a roaring fireplace, and plush furniture arranged in an inviting semicircle. The room exuded warmth, as if it were meant to host gatherings like this.

Two men stood up as they entered. Charley gestured dramatically. "Everyone, this is

Echo—Deacon's girlfriend. Echo, this is my husband, Dan."

Echo looked at the tall, broad-shouldered man and stopped, her jaw dropping slightly. "You know you look just like?—"

Dan lifted his hand, cutting her off with a good-natured grin. "I know, I know. I get that all the time. I'm not him. My name's Dan."

Echo blinked and then burst out laughing. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to embarrass you."

Charley waved it off with a laugh of her own. "Don't worry about it. Hereallydoes get that all the time. It's uncanny how much he looks like that actor. But believe me, he's nothing like that asshole."

The other man in the room laughed, the sound deep and warm. "Right, he acts like a completely different asshole," Connor quipped, earning a punch to the shoulder from Dan. Connor rubbed his arm and laughed. "I keep forgetting how fast you are for an old fart."

Dan smirked and gave Connor another punch, making Connor wince exaggeratedly.

"Old fart? Careful, I can still take you down," Dan warned playfully.

Gabby, who resembled Anna and Charley, laughed and stepped between them, shaking her head. "Please excuse my husband," she said, turning to Echo. "I'm Gabby, Deacon and Ronan's older sister. And this"—she gestured to the man next to her—"is my husband, Connor. We call him Con for short."

Connor gave a polite nod. "Nice to meet you," he said with a genuine smile.

Gabby gestured to a woman seated nearby. "And this is Fleur, Ronan's significant other."

Fleur's cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink, and she waved shyly. "Welcome to the insanity," she said with a soft laugh.

Charley huffed dramatically. "It isn't insanity. We have spirited conversations."

Her husband snorted into his drink, trying to contain his laughter.

Echo's face hurt from smiling. The camaraderie and lighthearted banter among the family members were contagious. By the time they were called to dinner, Echo felt a growing familiarity with Deacon's family that went beyond just knowing him—it was as if she belonged there.

Gabriel took on the role of gracious host, bringing Echo her preferred Chardonnay and serving everyone their favorite drinks. As they sat down at the beautifully set table, Echo couldn't help but feel a pang of melancholy. She wished Deacon and Ronan were there. It was a bittersweet moment, but she pushed the thought aside. She knew that if anything went wrong, Anna and Gabriel would be the first to know—and she'd know soon after.

Her first bite of Anna's cooking was a revelation. The roast was perfectly tender, the mashed potatoes creamy and rich, and the vegetables roasted to perfection. It was, quite simply, incredible. The lighthearted chatter quieted as everyone tucked into their meals, savoring every bite. Echo couldn't help but marvel at Anna's skill in the kitchen—it was nothing short of extraordinary.

After dinner, Connor and Dan began clearing the plates while Anna headed into the kitchen to retrieve dessert. Meanwhile, Gabriel and Fleur discussed potential charities for Guardian to support, with Gabby and Charley chiming in with their thoughts. Echo

leaned back in her chair, glancing toward the kitchen door. When it swung open, her jaw dropped.

There he was.

Deacon.

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She blinked twice, not quite believing her eyes, before shoving her chair back and racing across the room. She launched herself into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist as he caught her effortlessly. Deacon held her close, his hands gripping her firmly as he kissed her deeply.

Fleur gasped audibly, and Echo managed a quick glance, noticing Ronan standing just behind Deacon with a broad grin. Deacon broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers, and Echo took a deep breath—then almost gagged.

"Oh my God, you stink!" she said, pinching her nose.

Deacon laughed heartily. "Eighteen hours on a transport plane with no showers," he admitted unapologetically.

"I don't care," she said nasally, her fingers still pinching her nose. Leaning in, she pressed her lips to his once more.

"Uh, we care." Charley's voice interrupted from across the room.

Deacon turned to glare at his sister. "This doesn't involve you. Go away."

"You do have a bit of an odor," Gabriel remarked dryly, holding his finger under his nose for dramatic effect.

Ronan clapped Deacon on the shoulder. "Let's grab a shower so we can be polite company."

Deacon nodded, gently setting Echo back on her feet. "I'll be right back," he promised, stealing another quick kiss before he and Ronan bounded up the stairs, taking them three at a time.

Echo turned to Anna, her eyes wide. "You knew!"

Anna tilted her head with a sly smile. "Maybe."

Fleur laughed. "So, that's why we had to talk about the charities in Virginia and not in Colorado."

Anna grinned and linked arms with both women, leading them toward a cozy sitting room off the main living area. She shut the door behind them and turned to face them with a serious expression.

"Ladies, I want to tell you something, and you can take it at face value," Anna began. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for my boys—except interfere in their relationships—most of the time."

Fleur frowned slightly, and Anna turned to her first. "Fleur, you've been waiting to decide if Ronan will always love you. Sweetheart, there's never a guarantee. None of us can promise what tomorrow will bring. But I know my boy's heart. If he's given it to you, he won't give it to anyone else."

Fleur's eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and she nodded.

Then Anna turned to Echo. "And you." She pointed at her, her gaze unwavering.

Echo blinked, her mouth falling open. "Me?"

"Yes, you. You know your mind. You know exactly what you should do. And you

need to do it. You need to tell him."

Echo's eyes widened further, and her voice faltered. "How do you know?—?"

"I'm an old woman. I've seen a lot in my life, so I'm entitled to be honest," Anna said as she rose from her chair. "You women know your hearts; you understand your own minds. Now, stand up and be present in your own lives." She paused at the door, her gaze steady and warm. "I'm going to get dessert ready, and I'll let the boys know where you are."

With that, Anna left the room, leaving Fleur and Echo sitting in contemplative silence.

Fleur shifted uneasily before breaking the silence. "What were you supposed to tell him?"

Echo sighed and looked across at Fleur, her expression a mix of vulnerability and resolve. "That I love him," she admitted. "He knows how I feel, and I know how he feels. But the words—the actual words—without hedging or dancing around them, haven't been said."

Fleur nodded slowly, her fingers toying nervously with her nails. After a pause, she asked, "How long have you known Deacon?"

Echo laughed softly, the sound tinged with the weight of memories. "It feels like a lifetime because of everything we've been through, but in reality, it's been almost two months."

Fleur's eyes widened in surprise, and her lips parted slightly. "Two months?" She seemed taken aback, her voice edged with curiosity and a touch of doubt. "Do you think what's between you will last?"

The question lingered in the air, reflecting Fleur's uncertainty. Echo got up from her seat and sat next to Fleur, her tone gentle yet confident. "I'm more worried about losing any time I might have with him," she said sincerely. "As Anna mentioned, nothing is guaranteed. I understand what he does, and I know he loves it. I'm ready to accept him as he is, and I think he's ready to accept me as I am." Her gaze grew distant for a moment, reflecting on her own words. "If ten years, fifteen years, or thirty years from now we've grown apart, then I'll have had ten, fifteen, or thirty years of love and friendship with an amazing man. I'm not afraid of the future," she said firmly. "I'm afraid of losing any time with him now."

Fleur nodded slowly, chewing on her bottom lip as she absorbed Echo's perspective. Her hesitation was palpable, but her expression showed she considered the words deeply.

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Echo reached over and patted Fleur's leg, offering a small, reassuring smile. "You need to make up your own mind. Nobody can do that for you. I'm just sharing how I feel and how I view life. I've gone from college to the Army to working for the CIA, and I can tell you this—acting on your own convictions will always lead you down the right path."

Fleur glanced at Echo, her eyes softening as the weight of her thoughts settled. The two women sat there, sharing a quiet understanding, bonded by their love for extraordinary men in extraordinary circumstances.

CHAPTER 19

Deacon and his brother had flown nonstop from their mission, determined to get back home as soon as possible. The mission had dragged on far too long, but finally, they were free. Did they stink? Oh, hell yes. But stopping for a shower wasn't an option when home was within reach.

His mom had gotten word to him she'd planned a celebration for Echo, marking her last day at the CIA, and was going to introduce her to his sisters and Fleur. He'd passed that information to Ronan, and once they were cleared, they'd wasted no time. Wraith and Ranger had agreed to handle the transition of the team and equipment back to the States. With their team's assurance that everything was under control, Deacon and Ronan had jumped on the first flight out—a logistic nightmare involving a series of bounces from plane to tarmac and back again. After nearly twenty-seven grueling hours, they'd landed in Virginia. A Guardian vehicle had picked them up from the airport and drove them straight home.

Now, Deacon turned off the shower after washing himself twice—because, yeah, he'd needed it—and quickly dried off. He threw on jeans, a T-shirt, socks, and grabbed a small box from his uniform bag. Opening it, he smiled.

He'd purchased the ring thirty-two days ago while in San Francisco. During a rare “hurry-up-and-wait” situation, he and Ronan had visited a jeweler. Deacon had chosen a four-carat, square-cut diamond surrounded by channel-set diamonds. Guessing Echo's ring size had been a challenge. The store clerk, overly enthusiastic to help, had let him hold her hand for comparison. Weird as hell, but it worked. Ronan, of course, had laughed hysterically since he already knew Fleur's ring size.

Deacon walked out of his room and ran into Ronan, who was exiting his own. He held up the red velvet box, and Ronan tapped his front pocket in acknowledgment.

“Let's do this,” Ronan said, and they descended the stairs together.

Anna met them at the bottom. “The girls are in my study. Charley, Gabby, and their husbands are in the kitchen, helping me clean up. You've got the house. Love you both.” She kissed each of them before walking away.

Deacon turned to Ronan. “Did you tell her?”

Ronan shook his head. “No, but that doesn't mean she doesn't know. Her and Dad, I swear, they have eyes everywhere.”

Deacon nodded. “Indeed they do.”

Ronan grinned. “Let's go.”

They crossed the main living area and headed toward the small study Anna had claimed as her own years ago. Inside, Echo and Fleur sat on the couch, their

conversation somber. Deacon's heart softened at the sight of Echo, and he couldn't help but smile when her face lit up. She practically bounced off the couch to greet him.

"Hey," he said, his voice soft as he took her hand. "Come with me."

He led her through the study and onto the enclosed porch, shutting the door behind them.

"Oh, I like privacy," Echo teased, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"So do I," Deacon replied, lowering his head to kiss her. The connection between them was as electric and intense as the first time their lips had met.

He pulled back just enough to meet her gaze. "I have a question for you."

Echo's smile widened. "Oh, yeah? What kind of question?"

Deacon dropped to one knee, the red velvet box in hand. He opened it, revealing the sparkling diamond ring. "Echo Lashay, will you marry me?"

She stared at the ring, then at him, then back at the ring. Slowly, she shook her head. "I don't need this."

Deacon frowned, momentarily confused. "Excuse me?"

Echo smiled, her eyes brimming with emotion. "I don't need a ring like this. All I need is you beside me. I love you, Deacon. I love you with every fiber of my being. Of course, I'll marry you."

She dropped to her knees in front of him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Kneeling together in the middle of the porch, they kissed. It wasn't rushed or frantic. It was a kiss that promised forever.

It wasn't a time to go too far, but Deacon let the kiss deepen, pouring every ounce of emotion from the last thirty-two days into it. He didn't care that his family was just inside the house. He held her tightly, their connection banishing the weight he'd been carrying—the loneliness, the insecurity of not telling her he loved her, the worry that she might have second-guessed everything while he was gone. Every question, every fear, was chased away by her touch, by her kiss.

When he finally broke the kiss, he smiled down at her. "I love you. I know this is fast, but I don't want another day to go by without telling you or showing you how much I love you."

Sitting back on his heels, he pulled the diamond ring from the red velvet box. He gently took her left hand and slid the ring onto her finger. She shook her head, staring at the sparkling diamond in disbelief.

"Deacon, this is too much. The diamond—how can you afford something like this?"

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Deacon laughed, his deep voice warm and reassuring. “There’s a little more I need to tell you, but rest assured, I can afford it.”

She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing slightly in curiosity. “Does Guardian pay you that well?”

He chuckled. “They pay well enough.” He bent down and kissed her again. Just as the kiss began to deepen, a loud cheer erupted from inside the house.

Echo broke away, looking toward the noise. “Do you think we should get off our knees and go find out what the applause was for? Maybe a proposal?”

Deacon grinned. “How did you know Ronan was going to ask Fleur?”

Echo smiled coyly. “Maybe I’m a pretty smart cookie. Plus, your mom gave me serious vibes earlier.”

Deacon rolled his eyes. “My mother. Please tell me she didn’t spill the beans about what I was planning.”

Echo shook her head. “She didn’t. But she did tell Fleur and me to pull our heads out of our butts and be present in our lives.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, that sounds like Mom. Let’s go.”

He stood, offering her a hand before pulling her close as they walked back into the house. When they entered, all heads turned toward them.

Echo beamed and said, “Congratulations, Ronan and Fleur! We’re so happy for you.”

Fleur lifted her hand, showing off the dazzling ring Ronan had given her, the light catching the diamonds and making them sparkle. “Thank you,” she said, leaning into Ronan’s chest with a blissful smile. “I’m just following my convictions.”

Echo lifted her own hand, showing her new ring. “So am I.”

The cheer that rose from the room was loud and heartfelt. Champagne bottles appeared as if by magic, and toasts were made. The evening turned into a joyous celebration, filled with laughter and camaraderie.

By late evening, Deacon had had enough of the nonstop congratulations and chatter. He stood, taking Echo’s hand. “I’m going to take Echo home now.”

Ronan snorted, his grin wicked. “Right, that’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to take her home.”

Anna gave Ronan a pointed look. “I swear, son, I will find a switch. It’s easier here than it was in Vietnam.”

The room erupted in laughter as the girls giggled, and their husbands suddenly found other things to pay attention to. Ronan held up his hands in mock surrender. “Yes, Mother. I promise I’ll behave.” He mouthed, No, I won’t, to Deacon

Gabriel chuckled and tossed Deacon his keys. “I had Henry put Echo’s box in the backseat.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Deacon caught the keys midair and guided Echo out of the house. Congratulations rained down on them as they walked through the door and into the night.

Deacon unlocked the sleek black Mercedes coupe, opening the passenger door for Echo. She slid in, glancing at him as he walked around to the driver's side. Settling into the seat, he set the GPS to her address.

"So, you did find out where I live," she teased, threading her fingers through his as he started the car.

He turned to her, his smile tender and a playful glint in his eyes. "Of course, I did."

She laughed softly, and he winked at her. Deacon knew everything there was to know about Echo now. And once she signed the nondisclosure agreement his father was preparing, she would know everything about him, too.

Until then, he was going to love her with everything he had. He'd grown up watching his father love his mother deeply, selflessly, and unwaveringly for over thirty years. Now, with this remarkable woman beside him, Deacon intended to follow that same example. Tonight, he would show Echo, without question, how much she meant to him and how much he loved her.

They arrived at the small apartment complex where Echo lived. Deacon parked the sleek Mercedes, grabbed the box from the backseat, and followed her to the door. She unlocked it, pushing it open, and stepped inside.

Deacon paused in the entryway, taking in the warm, inviting space. The decor was unmistakably her. Layers of earthy tones blended with vibrant pops of color. Shelves filled with potted plants lined the walls, their greenery spilling over the edges. A patchwork quilt draped across the sofa and its matching footstool, adding a cozy, homemade touch. Small trinkets and framed photos dotted the surfaces, giving the space a sense of personality and history. It felt intimate, lived-in—a stark contrast to the sterile hotel rooms and bunkhouses he was used to.

“This is nice,” he said, setting the box down on a small table near the door. “It’s ... you.”

Echo smiled as she locked the door behind him, sliding the bolt into place with a softclick. “It’s home,” she replied, taking his hand.

Her touch was soft but purposeful, and she led him down the narrow hallway toward the bedroom. The warmth of her apartment followed them, the air tinged with the faint scent of lavender and something that reminded him of freshly baked bread. It was comforting—like her.

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As they stepped into her bedroom, Echo shut the door behind them. The room was just as personal as the rest of her apartment, with warm lighting casting a soft glow over a quilted bedspread and pillows stacked invitingly against the headboard. A small bedside table held a lamp, a worn paperback, and a glass of water. Everything about it spoke of her—practical, welcoming, and effortlessly beautiful.

She turned to him, her expression a mix of anticipation and vulnerability. Taking a step closer, Echo placed her hands on his chest, and her eyes told him everything he needed to know.

“Sex. Now.”

Echo’s voice was low and demanding as she pushed his T-shirt up, her eyes burning with intensity. Who was he to argue? Deacon tugged the shirt over his head and kicked off his tennis shoes while she angrily attacked his belt.

“Condoms,” he said, his voice a mix of practicality and urgency as he reached for his wallet.

She stilled his hand and smirked. “Got us covered. Birth control. Strip. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He barely got the words out before her shirt joined the growing pile of clothes. She paused, wrestling with the fabric when her hand got caught in the sleeve. She growled in frustration, yanking it free with a victorious huff, and Deacon couldn’t help the grin that split his face.

She shoved him backward before wriggling out of her slacks, revealing a utilitarian white bra and panties set that, for some reason, made his blood run hotter than anything lacy or elaborate ever could. As she stepped free of her clothes, he fumbled with his jeans, hopping on one foot toward the bed in his haste to strip.

“Careful!” She laughed, reaching out to steady him just as he lost his balance and toppled backward onto the bed. Aloud CRACK followed the impact as the bed frame gave way, dropping them unceremoniously to the floor. The headboard teetered and fell forward, narrowly missing his head.

For a moment, neither of them moved, wide-eyed and stunned. Then Echo’s gaze met his, and their laughter erupted, echoing off the walls. She collapsed onto the mattress beside him, clutching her sides as the sound of pounding from below made them laugh even harder.

“Oh my God, Mrs. Johansen is going to murder us,” she wheezed, slapping her hand over her mouth in a futile attempt to muffle the sound.

Deacon glanced at the clock. “It’s almost midnight. She better find some earplugs because she’s going to get more disturbances.”

He rolled over, pinning her beneath him with a playful growl as he nuzzled her neck. Her laughter melted into a sigh, soft and breathy.

“I missed you so much,” she murmured, her hands tracing the lines of his shoulders.

“I missed you more.” Deacon’s lips brushed hers, the kiss slow and consuming, pulling all the air from the room.

Her legs cradled him as their bodies found a rhythm born of longing and love. The way she moved against him, kissed him with abandon, and looked at him as though

he was her entire world—it was enough to make his heart stutter.

The first time was fast and desperate, a month of fantasies and frustrations exploding into reality. When he entered her, his breath caught, his chest tightening at the overwhelming sensation of being so close to her. He closed his eyes, needing a moment to rein in the storm inside him.

When he opened them again, it was to find her gazing up at him, her expression soft, filled with trust and love. This woman—his woman—was going to be his wife. The thought filled him with a sense of awe and purpose.

As her body tensed beneath him, the flush of her skin and the way her lips parted in a soft gasp burned into his memory. She was breathtaking, and when she shattered, the sight of her, the feel of her, pushed him over the edge.

When it was over, he rested his forehead against hers, both of them catching their breath.

“You’re going to marry me,” he whispered, his voice rough but certain.

Echo smiled, her fingers brushing against the stubble on his jaw. “I am.” She lifted her left hand, the engagement ring catching the dim light. “But honestly, this ring is way too flashy.”

“That ring is flashy for a reason.” He kissed her knuckles, his lips lingering. “It tells the world you’re taken. Period.”

She tilted her head, pretending to study it. “So, this is my ‘Sorry, boys, I’m off the market’ ring?”

“Exactly.”

She laughed softly, though her brows furrowed. “Well, since no one’s ever hit on me before, I think we could probably downsize.”

“Nope.” Deacon turned her face toward his, his gaze firm. “No downsizing, no trade-ins, no smaller stones. I can afford it, and I want you to have it.”

Her eyes misted, and she stared at the ring for a moment before looking back at him. “We’re really doing this. We’re getting married.”

“We are,” he said, leaning in to kiss her. “And you’ve got a wedding to plan.”

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Her eyes widened as realization struck. She shot upright. “Oh my God, I do! You have to meet my mom and dad. Where are we going to get married? I need a dress. What all goes into a wedding? I’ve never planned one before. I’ve been to a couple, but I didn’t pay attention. I need to look this up. Shit, I need my laptop?—”

Deacon laughed, pulling her back down onto the mattress. “The only thing we’re doing tonight is fixing this headboard, making love again, and getting some sleep. Wedding planning can wait.”

She relaxed against him, though her eyes were still wide with excitement. “And meeting my mom and dad?”

“We’ll get on a plane tomorrow.”

“Really?”

He nodded, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “For you? Anything.”

In that moment, Deacon realized the truth in his words. They weren’t empty or placating—they came from the very fabric of his soul. He’d do anything for her. Anything.

Echo’s smile softened, and she leaned up to kiss him, her lips lingering as if savoring the moment. “I love you,” she whispered against his mouth, her voice barely audible but filled with conviction.

Deacon kissed her again, his arms tightening around her. “I love you more.”

And as they laid tangled together on the broken bed, laughter fading into contented silence, he knew without a doubt that whatever challenges lay ahead—whether it was meeting her parents, planning a wedding, or navigating the uncertainty of their future—they would face them together. Because she wasn't just his fiancée, she was his everything.

CHAPTER 20

One Year Later:

Echo smoothed the delicate crystal and pearl-beaded lace over her waist and turned to examine herself in the full-length mirror. She still couldn't believe it. Never in a million years had she imagined she'd wear a wedding dress that cost as much as this one. The gown was breathtaking, with a fitted waist that accentuated her figure and a flowing ballgown skirt that sparkled under the soft lighting of the dressing room. The sleeves, crafted from intricate lace, kissed her wrists, and the bodice, adorned with crystals and pearls, shimmered with every movement she made.

Her mother flitted behind her, carefully taming a stubborn flyaway hair. "You look stunning," her mom said, her voice thick with emotion.

A soft knock on the door interrupted them. "Can I come in?" Anna's voice carried through.

Echo's mom answered, "By all means—as long as you don't have Deacon with you!"

Anna slipped into the room, her smile as radiant as ever. She clasped her hands together as her gaze landed on Echo. "Oh my goodness, you look like a dream!"

"She does, doesn't she?" Echo's mom said proudly, stepping back to admire her daughter.

Echo turned and smiled at Anna. “Thank you so much for letting us have the wedding here in Bozeman.”

Anna laughed warmly. “I don’t care where you have the wedding as long as you two get married. I’m so happy for you.” She crossed the room and kissed Echo’s cheek lightly, careful not to smudge her makeup. “I wouldn’t dare ruin all this beautiful work,” she added, dabbing a tissue to her eyes.

Another knock sounded, and Charley’s head popped into the room. “They’re ready for the first look and photographs.” Her eyes widened as she took in Echo’s appearance. “Oh, damn, girl, you look absolutely gorgeous!”

Echo smiled. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem! Now, come on, hurry up! We’ve got this all set up and arranged.”

Charley’s antics made Echo laugh. When Charley had asked if she could plan a surprise for Deacon, Echo couldn’t resist. She’d said yes immediately.

As they exited the small dressing room tucked into the back of the Rialto’s historic walls, Echo’s heart raced. The venue was perfect—elegant yet intimate, with its art deco charm, soaring ceilings, and vintage chandeliers casting a golden glow over the polished wood floors. The marquee outside proudly displayed their names in bold lettering: Deacon & Echo: A Love Forever.

Deacon stood with his back to her at the base of the Rialto’s grand staircase. The sunlight streaming through the high windows illuminated his sharp tuxedo. The fitted black jacket emphasized his broad shoulders, and his crisp white shirt and black bowtie completed the classic look. Echo paused at the top of the stairs, anticipation bubbling in her chest.

But instead of her descending the steps, Ranger emerged in a massive, hilariously oversized wedding dress, complete with a veil. The sight nearly made Echo double over with laughter. Cameras clicked and video recorders captured every second as Ranger moved confidently down the stairs. When he reached Deacon, he reached out and tapped him on the shoulder.

Deacon turned, and the sight of Ranger in a wedding dress sent him into immediate, uncontrollable laughter. He doubled over, clutching his stomach as the entire team of groomsmen—Ronan included—joined in the uproarious moment. Ranger curtsied before stepping aside, revealing the real bride.

When Deacon finally straightened and turned his gaze to Echo, the laughter melted from his face. His expression softened, his eyes locking on her as though nothing else in the world existed. He walked up the stairs, extending his hand toward her.

“Echo,” he said, his voice reverent. “No one could look more beautiful than you do at this moment.”

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Her cheeks flushed as she took his hand, and together, they descended the stairs to applause and cheers from the bridal party. Outside, the Rialto's open courtyard served as the perfect backdrop for their photos. A sprawling oak tree stood at its center, draped with fairy lights, while the historic brickwork of the venue framed the scene.

Deacon leaned close and whispered, "Did you authorize that little stunt?"

She laughed and nodded. "It was Charley's idea. I have no idea how she convinced Ranger to go along with it."

Deacon rolled his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips. "Charley can talk anyone into anything."

As the photos progressed, Echo felt the love and joy of the day seep into every moment. Her bridesmaids—Charley, Gabby, and three close friends from the Army and high school stood by her side, their dresses a soft sage green that complemented the natural tones of the venue. Fleur wore a darker green dress as her matron of honor. She and Ronan had married four months ago in a beautiful winter wedding at Deacon's parents' Colorado home.

Deacon's groomsmen, including Ronan as his best man, looked equally dashing in their tuxedos.

When the ceremony time neared, she and Deacon were separated, each retreating to their respective groups. Echo stole one last glance at Deacon as he walked away, her heart swelling with anticipation.

Today, surrounded by friends, family, and the timeless charm of the Rialto, she knew this was the start of their forever.

When Deacon had first presented Echo with the non-disclosure agreement, her mind had raced with every possible worst-case scenario. Was he about to confess that his family were war criminals, serial killers, or maybe even drug dealers? She'd had no idea what secrets the document protected, but she'd signed it without hesitation, trusting him completely.

When she'd finally read the details, she'd felt a rush of relief and determination. She'd looked up and boldly demanded a prenuptial agreement.

At first, Deacon had been caught off guard, but she'd stood her ground. The prenup wasn't for her protection; it was for his. She'd insisted on it to make it abundantly clear that she wasn't marrying him for his family's wealth, name, or prestige. The life they were building together wasn't about money or status but love, trust, and the future they both wanted. Signing that prenup had been her way of proving that to him—and to herself.

A soft knock interrupted her thoughts, and her father stuck his head into the room. "It's time, sweetheart. Are you ready?"

Echo turned to him with a radiant smile. She walked over and wrapped her arms around his sturdy frame, burying her face in his shoulder. "Daddy, I've never been more ready for anything."

He smiled down at her, his eyes misting as he carefully adjusted her veil, draping it over her face with the precision of a craftsman. They stood together in a quiet moment as the last notes of the processional music faded. Her father cleared his throat and looked at her, his voice thick with emotion.

“Every father dreams that their little girl marries someone who can care for her—someone who loves her as much as they do. I’m happy for you, baby girl. Happy for the life you’ve made and for the man who’ll stand beside you.”

Echo blinked back tears and waved her free hand at her face. “Daddy, please don’t make me cry. I don’t even know if my mascara is waterproof.”

Her father chuckled and shrugged, a mischievous glint in his eye. “I always cry at weddings. Your mom doesn’t, but I do. And if I’m going to cry, you’re going to cry.”

“No, Daddy, I’m not,” she said, shaking her head adamantly, though her voice trembled with emotion. “I refuse to cry.”

He winked at her. “There’s no reason for tears today, little girl. Only happiness.”

The bridal processional swelled, filling the historic Rialto’s grand theater space with a melody that seemed to echo off the art deco walls and polished wood floors. The high ceilings amplified the moment's beauty, and as the ornate stage curtain framed the altar ahead, Echo and her father stepped forward.

Echo's breath hitched as they rounded the corner, and the full assembly came into view. The room was packed with family, friends, and loved ones, all standing to honor her. The Rialto had transformed into a dreamscape of romance: cascading floral arrangements of white roses and greenery adorned every surface, the soft glow of candles flickered along the aisles, and a crystal chandelier above cast a gentle brilliance over the entire scene.

At the end of the aisle stood Deacon, his presence commanding and steady. His classic black tuxedo with sharp lapels and a perfectly tied bowtie fit him as if tailored by the gods. But it was the expression on his face that took her breath away. His dark eyes locked onto hers, filled with love and reverence that made her knees go weak.

“Only happiness,” her father reminded her softly, his voice steady as they began their walk down the aisle.

Echo smiled brightly, her heart pounding with joy. There was no reason for tears—only happiness. She had found the source of that happiness. She’d found her forever in Deacon.

EPILOGUE

Ethan Wolf glanced at the status screen, his sharp eyes quickly calculating the Guardian manpower currently stationed in Bozeman, Montana. Realistically, the city wasn’t just safe—it was practically a fortress. With Guardians and citizens per capita, it was probably the best-protected city in America at the moment. The thought made him chuckle as he turned back to his latest project.

His mysterious mentor—whom he still hadn’t met—had once again sent him an unsolvable puzzle with the instruction to “Figure it out.” Ethan loved every infuriating second of it. He. Loved. It. Not only did these challenges stretch his imagination in ways he couldn’t have conceived a decade ago, but his knowledge of all things computer had grown exponentially. It was like a mental gym workout, and Ethan was bulking up his brain.

The sound of gentle snoring caught his attention, and he glanced down at the bed beside his chair. Thor, his loyal companion, was sprawled out, his breaths slow and steady. The old dog had been with him through thick and thin, and the thought of him nearing his twilight years hit Ethan harder than he liked to admit. It felt like just yesterday he’d gotten the pupwhile working at the Annex—the Guardian facility on Grandpa Frank’s ranch in South Dakota.

Well, “pseudo-Grandpa Frank.” Frank adopted his half-brothers, Dixon and Drake, as adults, making him more of a father figure, but Ethan had the best old man in the

world. Ryan had raised him since the day he and his mother had gotten lost in that snowstorm on Ryan's mountain. Thank God Ryan had found them.

Given the age gap between Ethan and his half-brothers, everyone agreed that "Grandpa Frank" was the best term, and Ethan had called him that ever since.

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His phone buzzed on the desk, dragging him out of his thoughts. The notification on his secure cell phone told him there was a message on his personal phone. Only family or Star would call that number. Standing, he stretched and whistled softly. Thor perked up, stretching his stiff legs before padding behind Ethan as they headed upstairs. Ethan secured the door to his systems as a matter of habit before grabbing his phone from the counter and hitting play on the voicemail. Star's husky voice came through, strained and exasperated.

"Hey, Ethan, I really hate to bother you ... again. But I kind of need some help. Could you come over here? Ah, thanks."

He smiled, already envisioning what chaos she'd landed herself in this time. Star Peterson, his neighbor of three years, had a knack for attracting trouble like moths to a flame. Sometimes, she was just his friend. Other times, he wished they were more and ... well, that was something he didn't care to think about right now.

"C'mon, Thor," he said, grabbing his phone. They headed out, crossing the backyard and slipping through the gate in the fence to her back door. He knocked and waited.

"Come in!" Star's voice called from somewhere in the house.

"Star? Where are you?" Ethan asked, stepping inside.

"In the laundry room. Could you hurry, please?"

That tone had him jogging through the house. He stopped dead when he reached the laundry room, blinking at the sight before him.

All he could see were legs and feet sticking out from behind the dryer.

“What in the hell?” he muttered, stepping closer.

“I’m stuck!” Star’s muffled voice sounded both exasperated and embarrassed. She kicked her feet weakly. “Help, please?”

Ethan climbed onto the dryer, kneeling to get a better look. Sure enough, there she was, wedged tightly between the washer, dryer, and wall. He shook his head, biting back a laugh.

“How in the hell did you manage this?” he asked, reaching down to grab the waistband of her jeans.

“I was trying to get a sock that fell out of the basket!” Her voice had a plaintive, almost pitiful quality that made the situation funnier. Star’s uncanny ability to end up in bizarre predicaments was both endearing and baffling.

With a firm tug, Ethan started to pull her out. As more of her body emerged, he wrapped an arm around her waist to hoist her up and out of the tight space. Her face was lobster-red, a mix of exertion and pure mortification, and as soon as she was upright, she fainted.

“Damn it, Star!” Ethan scrambled to catch her before she hit the floor, carrying her out of the cramped laundry room and into her bedroom. Gently, he laid her on the bed, brushing a strand of hair from her flushed face.

Flipping open his phone, he dialed one of his many cousins. “Hey, Beth. I need to borrow some of your medical school knowledge.”

“I’m first-year, Ethan. My knowledge is pretty limited, but I can try. What’s up?”

“How long can a person hang upside down without permanent damage?”

The silence on the other end was thick with surprise. “What?”

“My neighbor was stuck behind the dryer. Upside down,” he explained, deadpan.

“How long was she stuck?”

“I came over as soon as she called, so maybe a few minutes? Longer if she waited before calling me. She fainted when I pulled her out.”

“What’s her pulse like?”

Ethan checked, pressing two fingers to her wrist. “Strong.”

“If her pulse is strong and she’s waking up, she’s probably fine. But if she has any preexisting conditions, you might want to get her checked out just in case.”

“Got it. Thanks, Doc.”

“Not a doctor yet, but give me time.” Beth laughed before hanging up.

Star groaned softly, her eyes fluttering open. As realization dawned, she covered her face with both hands. “God, not again.”

Ethan chuckled, prying her hands away. “The Star Curse strikes again.”

Her groan deepened as Thor shoved his muzzle into her face, sniffing her intently to make sure she was okay. Ethan leaned back, watching the exchange with an amused grin.

The woman was a magnet for calamity, a walking, talking Murphy’s Law. But as

much as her misadventures baffled him, he couldn't deny that Star—chaotic, unpredictable, and utterly exasperating—had a way of making life infinitely more interesting.

Forget Murphy. Star had that fool beat, hands down.