



Shadow Target

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: Fate was not finished with U.S. Marine Corps Captain Shep Porter and Willow Chamberlin, his ex-wife, a former Air Force Combat Jet Fighter pilot.

Shep works undercover with Delos, a global charity organization, and his upcoming assignment is to reinforce the charity's many schools in northern Ethiopia, a dangerous region known for international terrorists who hunt, kidnap girls and women and sell them into the European sex trade.

No one is more shocked than Shep when the Delos mission team tells him Willow is the pilot-in-command. Can he get along with his ex-wife and focus on the many civilian schools that need security upgrades? After all, it was his issues that had forced Willow out the door.

Now? As his heart blossoms with hope for a second chance, he wonders if he dares to tell her the truth that he still loves her. Does she still care for him? Unbeknownst to them, a cutthroat terrorist organization is stalking Willow in earnest. Will love be enough to save her?

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CHAPTER 1

Shep Porter entered Delos Charity H.Q. He had an uneasy feeling as he took a special secure elevator down two stories beneath the building and got off at the floor the Artemis Security mission planning area was on. After a few turns down some corridors later, he arrived at the briefing room and pushed the door open. At a long, polished maple table sat people he knew.

Being a civil engineer, Shep pretty much already knew what the briefing he was there for would be about. He'd been on long-term loan as a Captain in the Marine Corps and had been working undercover with Delos charities for two years now. The unease he'd initially felt about all this kept moving uncomfortably through his gut, and he felt it tighten. He'd already talked with Tal Culver-Lockwood, the President of Artemis, about the up-and-coming work assignment. She'd spotted him the other day, eating in the underground cafeteria on the second floor, and had sat down to talk with him for a moment, her own tray in hand.

"Hey, Cav Jordan wants you to head up a new global initiative, Shep. It involves construction and you're the right man for this upcoming mission."

"Oh?" He'd overseen global assignments as a civil engineer project manager before, handling millions of dollars involving overseas military assignments. At thirty years old, he was at the top of his game. His extensive military experience had honed his ability to manage thousands of people at a time. And to do it successfully. Nothing made him feel prouder of his people than to see them complete the assignments he set and bring them in on time and within budget.

He brought his attention back to the present; deep underground, walking into the briefing room. He sported a beard while on secret assignments, and knew people always said he looked like a California surfer dude because of it. It belied his position as an officer in the military. His gaze swept the large room with its two huge screens, one situated on each side wall. There were laptops ready in front of each chair, along with flash drives sitting beside each of them. Tal sat at one end of the long table with the mission brief and her own thumb drive beneath her hands, nodding hello to him. She waved for him to come and sit next to her, gesturing to the chair that sat on her right-hand side. On her left sat Wyatt Lockwood, her husband, ex-Navy SEAL, who was the head of mission planning and a fixture at every major briefing. The Texan gave him a big 'howdy' grin and Shep returned it, liking his laid-back demeanor.

Matt Culver, Tal's brother, two years younger than her, sat next to him, dressed casually in jeans and a black t-shirt, his brown and gold hair longish, giving him the same kind of California surfer look Shep sported. It was his lion-gold eyes that reminded Shep that Matt's family was only half Caucasian American, the other half mostly Turkish with a dab of Greek thrown in; a DNA hodgepodge of East meets West. Matt had that deep tan color of the Turkish people in his pedigree, even though Shep knew he didn't get outside as much as he'd like. As an ex-Delta Force operator, Matt headed up the branch of their global charity organization that dealt with kidnap and ransom situations. He wondered if this assignment had overtones of such 'KNR' potential involved. Usually, the military utilized him in covert engineering jobs in third world countries, picking up important intelligence info that he fed back to the CIA. Hoping KNR was not involved in this latest mission, he sat down in the comfortable black leather chair across from the red-haired Alexa Culver. She was the youngest of the three Culver siblings, looking very Caucasian, taking after that side of the family, and was the head of the Safe House Division for disadvantaged women and their families around the world.

Shep didn't want to admit it, but Alexa's red hair, piled up in a careless knot on top of her head as it was, reminded him of his ex-wife, Willow Chamberlin; she had red

hair. that she'd always worn fashioned into one long braid hanging between her shoulder blades whenever she'd flown her F-16 combat jet fighter out of Bagram Army base in Afghanistan. To say she was hell-on-wheels was an understatement. And she'd drawn his attention the very first time they'd met, coincidentally running into each another at a pizza joint on restaurant row. They were both Type-As, always in a hurry and, that night, for whatever reason, they'd backed into one another at the crowded pizza joint. He'd damn near knocked her over, catching her before she fell to the cobblestoned floor. Luckily for him, she had a wry sense of humor, thanking him for hauling her to her feet before she hit the tiles. Her first words to him over the din of constant chatter and the jukebox wailing out yet another tune were, "That's a helluva way to get my attention."

Warmth had flowed through his heart whether he'd wanted it to or not. Willow and he had fallen into bed that night like elks during rutting season, to put it bluntly. They'd had great sex. And then they'd had some more. It'd ended up they didn't sleep at all, and had greeted the dawn together with bloodshot eyes. Her red hair had been tousled, and she'd looked more like a young college-aged girl than the balls-to-the-wall combat jet jockey she really was. To this day, even though they'd divorced three years earlier, Shep had never forgotten that satisfied cat-like look in Willow's light-green eyes.

Snapping himself back from the past to the meeting at hand, his faraway gaze focused again on Alexa, who had been a US Air Force C-130 transport pilot herself assigned to Bagram. She wore a purple dress, feminine pearls around her neck and on her earlobes. He shifted his gaze to Cav Jordan. An ex-SEAL, he was one of their Asia and Middle-Eastern specialists, and had a thick briefing manual sitting in front of him. Tal had mentioned Africa, so he knew why Cav was here for this briefing. Shep had never been to Africa. He'd never been ordered to the 'Dark Continent'. He'd been to the Middle East, Europe and Afghanistan, but never there.

The door slid shut.

Shep knew these mission briefing rooms were state-of-the-art. The walls were made of special composite materials that would not allow any enemy satellites overhead to snoop electronically, or in any other way, through the ceiling or walls. Everything spoken in this room was recorded but channeled to the safety of a huge underground vault where all the servers, the heart of their top-secret system, were located. He'd been down there once, and thought it looked even larger than what the CIA had back at Langley. But then, Dilara and Robert Culver, the parents of the clan, were rich beyond most people's imaginations. They could easily afford the best. Dilara's Turkish and Greek sides of her family owned together the largest shipping container fleet in the world and were collectively worth trillions of dollars. Figures like that were mind-boggling to Shep, who loved math and numbers.

Yet, to meet the children of Dilara and Robert, all here in this room, one would think they were normal, everyday folk. But they weren't, not by a long mile. Their parents had raised them to not be tied to their money or their power or made to feel they were special or different from everyone else on the planet. Upon meeting any of them, Shep had always been amazed at how down-to-earth, warm and caring these three siblings were to everyone. That had been an amazing discovery when he'd first been ordered by the Marine Corps Commandant to work for Delos as an undercover agent for an undisclosed period of time. It was an odd order, and Shep had never been told exactly why he'd been chosen for the super-secret job. But his instincts, as well-honed as they were, whispered to him that Delos was so large and global that positioning a few well-chosen military people within, was a positive move for both sides.

People here treated one another, no matter who they were, as equals and in a friendly, respectful manner. Competition did not exist in this place, which was refreshing to him. Shep supposed that was down to Dilara's direct influence, since she was president of the global charity group.

"Well," Tal murmured, watching the first screen come alive down at the other end of

the room as Wyatt threw some photos up on it, “let’s get on with it, shall we?”

Shep saw the computer screen flicker on. He had his own laptop open, as well, fully prepared to take part in the high-tech briefing. “Let’s go for it,” he told her.

Smiling faintly, Tal said, “We’ve been thrown a bit of a curveball on this one, Shep. And we’re not sure you’re going to be willing to take it once you find out what that is, but know that the mission has already been cleared with the Marine Corps, CIA and FBI. For now,” and she gestured toward the screen at the other end of the room, “I’m going to ask Wyatt to give the briefing. You need to know what you’re in for. And of course, you can refuse the assignment at any time, with no hard feelings.”

“Right,” Shep murmured. What curveball? His engineer’s mind went into overdrive for a second, but he found nothing. He’d never turned down an assignment, and wouldn’t start now. He had no African experience, so that could well be what Tal was referring to. He focused in on Wyatt’s presentation, watching the screen.

“We’ll be sending you to Ethiopia. There’s a huge lake, Tana, in the Northern Provinces of the Amhara Tribe. At the southern tip of the lake is Bahir Dar: Population three-hundred thousand and change, part of the capitol of the Amhara Region. The Blue Nile, a major waterway, originates from the lake.” He raised an eyebrow and gave Shep a glance. “Emperor Haile Selassie, long since passed, was of the Amhara tribe. At one time, he considered moving the national capitol to his own tribe’s regional capitol, but didn’t.”

“Was that my history lesson on this trip?” Shep asked, grinning.

Wyatt chuckled. “I believe our people need to know the history of the area, as well as just cold logistics. It puts a lot of understanding in us as to how things evolved in any given spot in the world.” He pushed a second thumb drive toward Shep. “There’s the rest of your history lesson as well as a lot of other useful did-you-knows.”

Smile increasing, Shep took the folder. “I’ve got a long flight in front of me, so I’ll be needing some good reading material.”

Wyatt produced a third thumb drive, handing it to him. “The rest of it is on here. Top secret. Need-to-know only. And only you and the pilots need to know.”

“Pilots?”

“Yes, we hired two of them from Shield Security, out in Alexandria, Virginia, a year ago. They are under contract to us moving forward. They will be ferrying you and your team around various villages in the Northern Provinces.”

“Okay,” Shep said, placing the thumb drives into his briefcase.

Wyatt pressed a key on his laptop and up came a new photo on the big screen.

“This is a Somali tribesman, Tefere David, who was born there but has spent most of his time in Ethiopia and will generally make your life hell while you make the security upgrades around each of our Delos charities on that list of cities and villages in front of you,” and he gestured to the information on the wall screen. “Tefere David is forty years old, black hair, dark brown eyes, and is a scavenger of the first order. He was kidnapped from his village at the age of eight by Somali warlord Cumar Hanad, who then raised him. Tefere refers to him as his father and works for him to this day. He now has a five-hundred-man group of ragtag Somali soldiers in Ethiopia where he has based his so-called kingdom. Over the last six months, he and his thugs have been hitting our charity outposts in the rural villages you see on the screen. Their intent is to rob. To take money, food and anything else they can carry. It is disrupting the Delos charity program in that region, as a result. So far, they have not killed anyone. He’s got one helluva track record on doing just that, but we believe from the emerging pattern, that this time he’s wanting goods, not taking lives. At least, not yet,” and Wyatt lifted his head toward Alexa. “You want to fill Shep in on

what he's gonna be doing?"

Alexa pushed yet another thumb drive across the table to him. "Tefere is in bed, if you'll pardon the pun, with Valdrin Rasari, a Russian billionaire, the biggest and most successful sex trafficker in the world. Rasari lives in the small European country of Malgar which is near Albania. We have been working closely with Shield Security who have intercepted a cell phone call, via the CIA, of Rasari and David making a deal worth millions. For the last six months, the Somali has been using his Russian-supplied army vehicles to roar into one of the villages where a Delos charity is located. They shoot up the general area to scare the population into submission. There's always a huge Russian truck along on these attacks. His soldiers spread out and start grabbing young girls around age twelve through fifteen, and boys seven to twelve and throw them in the truck. They kidnap them and then they're transported to Malgar where Rasari puts them on a global dark web internet site, which is their selling block. These children will never see their families again." Her voice dropped. "Statistics on stolen children who are pushed into sex trafficking show that they are usually dead before the age of eighteen." Alexa shook her head. "It's a hopeless, brutal life for them."

Shep scowled. "Shouldn't the Ethiopian army be doing something? Or the police? Or whoever?"

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“Not enough men or equipment, and there’s little intel on where Tefere David will hit next. He’s wily and he’s careful on cell phone usage. The CIA only got lucky when they intercepted that one call between the two slavers six months ago,” Alexa added.

“I’m getting the picture that me and my team will be in the midst of David’s war campaign of attacking Delos schools,” Shep said, giving Tal and then Wyatt a look.

Tal nodded. “That’s why you’ll have a full security team from Shield Security of fourteen fine men and women. Right now, we have a Delos C17 Globemaster transport on its way over to Bahir Dar with them on board. Lucky for us, they have airport runways long enough for a bird of that size. The Shield tactical team is also on board, and so are their vehicles, supplies, weapons, and anything else they need. We’ve invested heavily via Shield, to raise the level of protection for our charities. We’ve asked them to go undercover, and for all of them to wear the Delos insignia on their uniform even though they aren’t really a part of our organization. I don’t think it would go down all that well if every man and his dog knew they were the cream of the crop of ex-military people we’ve hired from one of the best global security agencies in the world.”

“The Ethiopian government has given their blessing on our mission into their country with our undercover Shield Security people,” Wyatt told him. “Major General Iskinder Hakym, the Northern Command boss, has approved the Shield weapons, vehicles and people. We’ve put signed orders on every Shield Security person so that if they’re ever challenged by the ENDF, the Ethiopian National Defense Force, we won’t have any of them arrested and thrown in the brig. They will be carrying Delos orders on them, as well. If anything goes south, Shield Security will become directly involved in getting their people out of danger.”

“I would imagine, under the circumstances,” Shep said, “the general would welcome those Shield Security people with open arms. Maybe a parade?”

A sour grin crossed Wyatt’s mouth. “Damn good thing you’re a Marine and you know the military, Porter.”

Shep nodded. “It helps. So, am I putting this together correctly? I’ll have my undercover U.S. Navy Seebee construction team, posing as Delos employees, any equipment and supplies I need to upgrade the Delos charities, plus this robust security detachment from Shield, also undercover, because David is out to plunder any Delos charity he can?”

“Damn,” Wyatt drawled, “you’re the brightest bulb in the pack, pardner.”

The whole table broke into chuckles, everyone trading grins. Dry and black humor were a necessary component to every military vet and branch.

“No half-watts in here,” Shep intoned, bringing another round of good-hearted laughter. It broke the seriousness of the assignment for a moment.

“I’m going to hand this briefing over to Cav Jordan,” Wyatt said, motioning to the ex-SEAL. “Cav? You’re one of our best Middle East and Asian experts. Fill him in on the political drama going along with everything else Shep will have to contend with?”

Cav nodded and slid a thumb drive toward Shep to add to his growing collection. “The Blue Nile is one of the most vital, life-giving rivers in Africa.” He flipped a map up on the screen showing Khartoum, Sudan and a blue line moving like a lazy snake across Africa, into Ethiopia and eventually connecting to Lake Tana at Bahir Dar. “The Blue Nile originates from Lake Tana, moves up through Ethiopia, into the Sudan, merging with the White Nile, becoming known as just ‘The Nile’, which

flows through Egypt and completes its journey at the Mediterranean Sea near Alexandria. The Ethiopian government decided to build a dam just inside their border with Sudan. It's called the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Project. They wanted to harness hydroelectric power for their people. The project started in April 2019 and is slated to come online in 2025, providing there are no major construction setbacks. The President of Egypt had a secret discussion that got televised live in what may have been a hot mic flub, or maybe intentional. He was aired discussing ways to destroy the dam, including the harnessing and supporting of anti-Ethiopian-government rebels. The governments of Egypt and Sudan are worried that this new Ethiopian dam coming online will hurt water resources in their country. Of course, Ethiopia says it won't."

"But we have drought in Africa," Matt Culver said. "And by damming up the Blue Nile, Ethiopia may well cause the lowering of water levels and the depletion of the underground water table in the region during low rain years. Isn't that right, Cav?"

Cav nodded. "Yes. It's a real issue. Ethiopia is trying the hard sell to its own people that this dam is a good idea. Countries to the north, however, feels it's going to hurt their water supply, especially during this unprecedentedly long, ongoing drought brought about by climate change."

"So, it's a flashpoint," Shep gathered.

"Yes, and a number of the northern villages where Delos charities operate are within twenty miles of that dam project."

Studying the map before him, Shep said, "So that means the Shield Security team has to be aware of 'other' domestic terrorists or mercenary soldiers, who may be Egyptian or Sudanese in disguise, who are really in the area to scuttle the dam project?"

“Bingo. There’s twenty-thousand people and their villages that are going to have to be moved before this dam goes online. No one’s happy about it. All the farmers down below the dam in Ethiopia, who need the flood season of the Blue Nile to water their crops, are out of luck. It will put an end to flood seasons. It’s an ongoing destabilizing threat to the Northern Province of Ethiopia. What we care about are the Delos charities in that region. We don’t want our people inadvertently dragged into a war with Egypt or Sudan over water rights. So, we’ve got an Air Force satellite on loan from those good people, and it will be stationed over your area. We want to see who’s around and what’s cookin’,” Wyatt told him. “The CIA, as well as our people, will be monitoring the situation 24/7/365.”

“Are you looking out for Tefere David, also?” Shep asked.

“Yes. We are working with a CIA agent on the ground who is undercover in Bahir Dar. He’s adding David to his watchlist for us and if he picks up any intel, Shield and Delos will both be informed immediately.”

“That’ll make me feel a little safer while we’re stringing ten-foot cyclone fences topped with razor wire all around these charity grounds,” he said, glancing at the blueprints for some of the installations.

“The concertina razor wire, we hope, will act as a decisive deterrent to any attack on a Delos charity building,” Matt said. “There’s only so much we can do in these rural areas, but something is better than nothing.”

“Right,” Shep agreed, “it is.”

“The villages you need to go to all have dirt air strips and nothing more. They’re basic,” Wyatt told him. “The Shield pilots wear a Delos patch on their uniforms, as well. They are flying a de Havilland Twin Otter: a Pratt-and-Whitney-driven twin-engine airplane. These two pilots have been undercover there for one year on this

assignment and know the lay of the land and are competent with rural landing situations and challenges like this. This particular plane can normally hold up to nineteen passengers. But we've had it specially designed by the manufacturer so that all seats can be removed and plenty of foodstuffs, supplies and construction equipment can be brought on board, instead."

Cav spoke up. "Shep? These villages are poor. If you ever left any of your tools, supplies or equipment behind? They would disappear. What this means is that each time you move to a new village, those Shield pilots are going to be flying four or five trips that day, to firstly get the security team in place, then fly you and your support team in, and then to bring in all the rest of the tools and equipment you need. It will be a long day."

"And their security team will be protecting our gear and supplies in the meantime?"

"Yes."

"You will receive tents and cots for everyone," Wyatt told him. "This is like an overnight camping trip. You'll carry your own water and food, as well. We have two cooks assigned to your unit to feed everyone."

"I'll have to polish up on my outdoorsmanship," Shep said, smiling faintly as he studied the pages listing all the tools and equipment that would be flown from one village to another.

"Oh," Wyatt said, leaning back in his chair, giving him a good-ole-boy grin, "you Marines made rough, challenging missions an art form. I'm sure a tent and cot sound like the Hilton Hotel to you."

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Shep chuckled and nodded. “Got me dead to rights on that one, Lockwood. Spot on.”

Tal leaned forward, giving Wyatt a glance. “Shep? What do you think of the assignment so far? Is it a go?”

“Yes. This is just like Afghanistan, Iraq and, later, outlying villages in Turkey me and my construction teams were assigned to, whether building irrigation ditches, drilling a well, or trying to otherwise improve their lives while bad guys lurked around. No difference to me.”

Tal’s lips thinned. “Remember? I told you there was a curveball to this assignment.”

Shep held her somber look. “You did. What is it?”

Gesturing to the screen, she said, “The PIC, pilot in command, and co-pilot both work for Shield Security out of Bahir Dar. Willow Chamberlin is the PIC. Your ex-wife.”

The pit of Shep’s stomach clenched like a painful fist. He stared at Tal, shock racing through him. He had very little connection with Willow. Shep never asked where she was or what she was doing. They kept their few emails brief, breezy and impersonal. But still he always looked forward to them, no matter how brief or blasé they were. Knowing he had hurt Willow badly, Shep sensed she was protecting herself from some immature actions on his behalf in the past. She was a feminist, and he’d overreacted to that side of her all the time. And because they’d both been cocksure and hotheaded, neither had given, nor even considered, a compromised middle-ground to keep their budding relationship viable. It had been a death-spiral for their marriage, no matter how well they’d gotten along in bed. That was all three years in

the past, and now it seemed like another lifetime ago.

Tal studied him, silence cloaking the room.

Shep turned, his gaze on the screen as he stared at Willow's image. In the displayed photo, she was wearing a dark-green one-piece flight suit with her name patch, 'Chamberlin, W.' stitched on it. On her left sleeve was sewn an American flag. On the right, as part of her undercover status, in big yellow embroidered letters was 'Delos Charities' with her name below it again.

His throat tightened. He was unable to tear his gaze from her oval, unsmiling face. She wore an olive-green baseball cap with the Delos logo on the front of it. She had her bright, carrot-red hair gathered into a ponytail. But it was those green eyes of hers, large, intelligent and taking no prisoners, that his gaze was stapled to. She was standing next to her Otter twin-engine aircraft, hands in pockets, looking supremely confident. He knew that look. After all, she'd been a badass combat pilot, hurling destruction below her to keep her comrades in arms safe on that ever-changing battlefield called Afghanistan.

"Willow and her co-pilot, Dev Mitchell, are both Shield Security employees, and they have a contract to stay at Bahir Dar for two years. Her job as PIC is to take all the supplies Delos ships in monthly to all the villages you see on that piece of paper. Her copilot is another ex-USAF transport pilot and Shield employee. Together, they fly into each of the dirt strips next to the villages, delivering the goods and supplies to the Delos charity that supports its population. Both had known one another at Bagram and become good friends."

Shep noticed the black nylon drop holster around Willow's right thigh and the .45 pistol in it. "So, nowhere in Africa is safe?" he asked, turning to Cav, the expert.

"Not really," he said. "Some places are safer than others. Some places hire security

guards to keep it that way. With domestic or foreign terrorism, no place in the world is safe anymore. It isn't just Africa." Cav pointed toward the screen. "As I understand it, Willow and Dev are in constant potential danger because they're operating in outlying, rural villages. We know that Tefere's soldiers rove these areas, looking for ways to rob and plunder the Delos charities in them. The only reason they haven't been able to is due to a back-door agreement with General Hakym. He's put a squad of ten soldiers at each Delos charity. They live in those villages and that has deterred several attacks by Tefere David on them, as a result. But it's not foolproof."

"And," Wyatt said, "that's all ending once we get our new security measures in place via Shield. We may also have to place a permanent security team at each location until Tefere David can be caught and brought to justice or killed by General Hakym's soldiers. They are actively looking for him and his men, but it's a big area and he doesn't have unlimited resources to find the bastard."

"I see." Shep tried to settle his thudding heart as he kept his gaze trained on Willow's face. Her nose was red from being out in the sun too long. She was a redhead; her skin was very white and very susceptible to too much sunlight. That was why she'd always worn a baseball cap at Bagram while she'd been stationed there in another desert country. The sleeves of her uniform were rolled up to just below her elbows and he saw the aviator's watch on her slender right wrist. Willow was five foot seven inches tall, around a hundred and forty pounds. She was built lean like a greyhound, with small breasts and slender hips. To an outsider, it would be a hard guess she'd been a combat pilot. He smiled to himself, knowing she was a like a Belgian Malinois combat attack dog who took no prisoners. That side of her rarely showed, except when she was sitting in the cockpit of her F-16, taking out the bad guys to protect the American soldiers below her spread wings.

"Well?" Tal asked, holding Shep's gaze. "Are you still in this assignment or not? You will be interfacing with Willow all the time. She and her copilot will be constantly flying in and out of the villages where you'll be working to put the security fencing in

place for each charity.”

He shrugged. “I’m okay with it.” He saw Tal’s eyes narrow speculatively on him, almost feeling her energy in his mind, trying to read his thoughts.

Wyatt added, “Look, Willow and Dev have worked with Delos out in that area of the world for a long time. They’re good at what they do. Both are savvy ex-military trained pilots and they know the lay of the land. You need to realize that they both have experiences and observations that are going to help the new Shield security team and your Delos employees, so you need to listen to them, Shep. Is that going to be a problem between you and Willow?”

Shep knew he was a stubborn but stable kind of personality. Just like Willow was, but he’d called her headstrong and bullheaded. When one puts two bars of titanium steel in a vice, not much give or flexibility is accorded one to the other. Wiping his bearded jaw, he said, “Not a problem. I value my people’s protection. I’ll listen to Willow and Dev’s experience and counsel. Just because Willow and I couldn’t make the marriage work doesn’t mean I can’t work with her on a professional level.” Shep saw the question in Wyatt’s eyes, but the Texan said nothing, only giving him a brief nod.

“Okay, everyone can leave except Tal, Alex, Matt, Shep and myself,” Wyatt told the room. Within a few minutes, the room was cleared out, the door shut, and silence returned to it.

Alexa said, “Shep? This is private between the four of us. We’re shutting off the recording equipment because it needs to stay within this circle. I know Willow personally. I’ve worked with her closely in the past. I was an Air Force officer and flew a Warthog combat jet like she did.” She opened her hands. “You might say we’re sisters of a sort because of the background and experiences as combat pilots that we share.”

“Okay,” Shep said, “what are you trying to say, Alexa?”

Her body language visibly uncomfortable, Alexa said, “I’ve never lost contact with her. We’ve always remained good friends. From time to time, Willow would open up to me about her marriage to you. It sounded more like a dog and cat fight. You two butted heads constantly. Neither of you, from the sounds of it, could make a compromise for the other. You were always both right. Neither was ever wrong.” She tilted her head. “Am I incorrect about my analysis?”

Shep could feel the tension rise slightly in the silence of the room. Women talked. He knew that. So, he wasn’t surprised that Willow and Alexa were tighter than thieves because of their mutual military background. Clearing his throat, he said, “No, your observations are correct.”

“Okay,” Alexa pressed, “if that’s so? What makes you think that you’ll be able to get along now for the sake of the assignment?”

It was a fair question and Shep knew it. He ruffled inwardly; his pride hurt. But then, he knew he had too much pride and wasn’t ever able to admit he was wrong about something. “Maturity? Time? We’ve been divorced three years. I’ve grown up, I hope, a lot since then.”

Wyatt jumped in. “Shep, with all due respect, I’ve looked at the reports from your people when researching your field notes. You are considered an able manager, you listen well, you ask for your employees’ thoughts and ideas. That’s very different than what we’re hearing about happened between you and Willow. You seemed not to be able to respect the other person’s ideas or experiences, at all.”

Shep felt the heat of the people at the table. It was a legitimate conversation, and he knew the Delos people were trying to ensure a successful outcome to this mission. He could feel them questioning if he could honestly carry off the assignment

successfully, given his stubbornness toward Willow. Folding his hands over the manual in front of him, he gave them all a serious look. “No, you’re right. I’ll make it work because we aren’t married any longer. To me? Now? She’s just an employee from another company. I’m a professional working undercover for Delos. I’ll slip into my managerial mode, and we’ll get along and I’ll make it work.” He saw some relief in their expressions. They needed assurance that he would do his level best to keep it a peaceful venture, not a contentious one like their marriage had been for all those stormy years.

Tal sat back. “Okay, good enough, Shep. Wyatt is going to send Willow an encrypted file that will give her all the info on you, on the large Shield Security team coming in posing as Delos employees, and on the undercover Navy Seabee construction teams. Our next step is to find out whether she can work with YOU.”

CHAPTER 2

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Willow Chamberlin was just starting her second cup of strong, fragrant Ethiopian coffee at her office desk when there was a ‘ding’ from her laptop. She was wading through a pile of papers about the C-41 that would be landing later today at the Bahir Dar airport outside of town.

“Hey,” Dev called from the door, sticking her head in, “I think I’ve got final arrangement with General Hakym’s men to guard all this hardware coming in on that C-41 this afternoon.”

“That’s good news. Come on in,” Willow said, making a gesture for her to sit down in front of her badly scratched wooden desk. The office was small and she had a fan up hanging in one corner, sending a breeze throughout it. Air conditioning in her condo was always questionable. Some days, the electricity coming into the city was strong and constant. Other days? No so much so. It meant anything needing electric didn’t work. For her two-bedroom condo on the fourth floor, the place became sticky with humidity because Lake Tana’s shore was just outside the building’s doors.

Dev was wearing shorts that fell halfway down her long, curved thighs, a sleeveless gray athlete shirt and no bra. She was barefoot as she came in, a sheaf of papers in her left hand. When they didn’t have to fly out or otherwise leave the building, both of them chose Americanized outer wear, instead of covering up their arms and legs like Ethiopian women did. They could dress like this inside but when out, they too, covered up by wearing long pants and long-sleeved cotton shirts. No sense in bringing unwanted attention to themselves. Dev had piled her shoulder-length curly brown hair up into a loose topknot, held in place by two dark-green plastic combs. The high humidity always curled her fractious hair into a mind and shape of its own.

Opening her laptop, Willow looked down, eyes narrowing. The ding had been a folder arriving from Delos HQ. Now what? It wasn't like they hadn't had enough to do the last month, getting prepared for the massive supply build-up coming in on that C-41 later today. She and Dev had worked tirelessly with General Hakym's people to firstly find a warehouse big enough to put all the construction supplies and equipment in. And secondly, to arrange for a twenty-four-hour security detail on it. Because if there was none, Willow knew the poor of this city would sneak like thieves in the night into the warehouse and steal it empty. What they couldn't carry? They'd find a way to push or drag it out of the warehouse. No, nothing was safe from the poverty-stricken who would turn around and sell it all. And that money would mean survival, food in the mouths of their starving families.

Opening the laptop, she muttered, "Got a new file from HQ," and her brows dropped. "I need this like a hole in the head..."

"Ugh, not another one!" Dev protested, setting her papers on the edge of Willow's desk. "What does Wyatt Lockwood want us to do NOW? Clone ourselves? Doesn't he realize we're working at lightspeed to get this damned thing in place before that C-41's arrival? Maybe Shield Security should send us two more pilots and a second Otter, so we can get some rest?"

"My, my, you ARE testy this morning," Willow teased, throwing her a careless grin. "I just made a pot of coffee. Maybe you need a second or third cup? Hmmmmmm?"

Grumpily, Dev said "Good idea. Actually, I've been up since 0400 working on this shit. This will be my SIXTH cup of coffee." She looked down at her watch. "And it's only 0800." It sounded almost like a whine.

Snickering, Willow said, "Poor baby. Suck it up, Mitchell." She hit the key that would open the encrypted file as Dev muttered a "fuck you" and left the room, heading for the small kitchen. Willow loved her copilot and gave her an evil laugh.

The past year they'd worked together had been one of harmony, military ways of living, thinking, and seeing the world in the same way, which had made their teamwork flawless. They were a good pilot-copilot combo, and she appreciated Dev. Shield Security, their employer, paid them very well for their undercover jobs, so she could only bitch so much.

Even though Dev looked like a modern-day Barbie doll, which she just hated being called, Willow thought her tall, languid, sable-haired, blue-eyed copilot really did match the Barbie ideal of beauty. Dev was extremely attractive and always drew men's attention in a heartbeat. But Dev, like herself, came from bad marriage experiences and neither of them were much interested in the opposite sex right now. Dev had the same low opinion of men as her: good for sex, but little else. Yep, she could identify with that take-no-prisoners attitude. And most men in Ethiopia were devoutly Orthodox or Coptic Christians. And they had the tight reins of those doctrines firmly around women, treating them with bias and no respect. Seeing them as second-class citizens, at best. But it was still better than in the Sudan, Willow thought, where the Sharia Law of the Muslims reduced women to beings of lesser importance than a donkey or a cow. At least here in Ethiopia, they only had to cover up their arms and legs and didn't have to wear a scarf on their head or a veil across their face. She was glad that the influence of the Muslim religion was minor in this country.

Her eyes widened as she read the terse email from Wyatt Lockwood, head of Mission Planning for Artemis, the in-house Delos security agency.

"Willow, please read the list of security and construction people who will arrive seven days from receipt of this file. The biggest hurdle to jump here, is with you. Your ex-husband, Shep Porter, has agreed to head up this multi-construction assignment. And he knows that you are there and that you two will be working with one another all the time. The only potential fly in the ointment is from your end. I need to know if you can work with him or not? Because if you can't, I'll assign

another civil engineer to this project. Call me on the sat phone after you've read through this file. I need to know your decision. Happy trails, pardner, Wyatt."

Dev came back with a fresh cup of coffee in hand. "My, you are looking pissed off all of a sudden," she said, sitting down opposite Willow.

"I can't believe this," Willow muttered, looking up at her friend. She turned the laptop around, angling the screen so Dev could read Wyatt's unencrypted email. Willow watched her fine, thin eyebrows dip and her lips crease to a thin line.

"You're friggin' kidding me!" Dev looked up; eyes huge with disbelief. "Your EX is coming HERE? And you have to work with him? What kind of sick joke is this, Willow?" and she jabbed her finger at the screen.

"Don't kill my laptop," Willow muttered in warning, pulling it away from her and turning it back around.

"Seriously?" Dev said, sipping the hot coffee. "Shep Porter is coming HERE? Mr. Patriarchy himself? Doesn't like treating any woman with respect and the fact she is equal—or better than him? Ugh!"

Sitting back in the squeaky plastic chair, arms across her breasts, Willow scowled at the laptop screen. "I never expected anything like this... it's a shock."

"But you DO stay in touch with him," Dev accused.

"Very, very infrequently," Willow defended. "And it's certainly not personal stuff. He doesn't even know that I went to work with Shield Security in Virginia since we divorced."

Dev gave her a one-eyebrow-raised look. She pushed hair away from her temple.

“It’s been three years, Willow. And you two still exchange emails from time to time. What does that say? Doesn’t look very divorced-like, if you ask me.”

Willow grimaced. “I don’t know. He’s not a bad person, Dev. He’s got this shitty patriarchy societal thing that brainwashed him and every other kid. He has to work through it, and I’m not interested in being his whipping post in order to do so. He’s just not right for me, is all.” She let out a sigh. “And he’s a damn good civil engineer. I knew he worked for Delos undercover, but never in a thousand years did I think he’d ever take an assignment where he knew I’d be.”

Grumbling, which was Dev’s second nature, she muttered, “I smell a dead fish here.”

Lips curving faintly, Willow tipped her head back, looking up at the white stucco ceiling, sweat running down her ribcage. She hated the office on days when the air conditioning labored. It was like a sweat box in the room. “I don’t. Wyatt is giving me full authority to pull the plug on him being assigned to this gig.”

“Ditch him. I’ve seen very few patriarchal males EVER learn to become matriarchal and treat us like respected equals. Does a leopard ever change his spots?”

Willow heard the flatness in Dev’s husky voice. “You know? For being a trash hauler in the Air Force, flying those ugly looking C-130s, you really got a take-no-prisoners combat jet pilot attitude,” and she gave her friend a feral smile. Dev wrinkled her nose, consuming more coffee.

“I’m a Type-A just like you, Chamberlin. And I hauled my C-130 around with the best of them. Got shot at many, many times spiraling into and out of Bagram. Not to mention, you taking those bastards out on the ground. You flew high in the sky, but I was well within range of our enemy’s weapons when I was spiraling in and out of Bagram. Plenty of holes in the fuselage.”

“Touché,” Willow conceded. She knew Dev had only just missed out on being assigned to F-16 training by a bare two lousy points. In her opinion, the Air Force fighter command should have taken her, but she often thought that a woman’s looks had subtle, unconscious effects on the decision-making processes with the male officers and commanders who ran the pilot training programs. Dev looked fragile and had ‘help me’ written all over her. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Dev needed protection like a shark in its own environment needed anything but food, and Willow grinned a little at that sudden epiphany. Dev was, by nature, a combat jet pilot, pure and simple, which is why they probably got along so well together in the cockpit. Balls to the wall or get the hell outta their way!

“Well?” Dev goaded. “What are you going to decide? Are you willing to dip back into that vat of acid you and Porter swam around in before you wisely ditched one another?”

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Shrugging, she said, “I don’t know... I need to seriously think about this.”

“How long do you have before you have to give that cowboy your decision?”

“Today.”

“Humph.”

“What would you do?” Willow respected her friend’s insights. And as crusty and belligerent and totally flippant as Dev could be, based upon the rough childhood she had barely survived, Willow knew she could trust the woman to be honest.

“Tell Lockwood no. You don’t need Porter back in your life. Hell, Willow,” and she gestured around the room, “this is the biggest assignment that has ever been handed by Delos. And this new thing isn’t a little one. It’s huge and damn near, in my opinion, unfair to put on our shoulders. We’re friggin’ pilots, not warehouse managers. We’ve been put in the position of renting a warehouse, dealing with General Hakym’s people, begging for security from them, and then? We gotta find a decent place to put ALL these security and construction people coming in. They all have to have an apartment where they can live while on this mission. The logistics on this are death-defying to me. I’d much rather be flying my C-130 at a thousand feet and be above all this shit rather than slog through it with waist-high waders daily like we have been doing the past few months. The run-up to that C-41 landing and knowing we were going to have to find housing for thirty people, has been brutal.”

“Yeah,” Willow said, rocking a little in her squeaky chair, “it’s been pretty sucky. I don’t like it either, but hey, we signed on undercover to Delos to serve. So? We’re

serving, but not in a way we want too. Life's like that, you know? You never get good stuff all the time. The bad is mostly what we get on a daily basis."

"No argument there," Dev muttered, sipping the last of her coffee, staring at the grounds in the bottom of the mug. "And Porter is TROUBLE with a capital T. You know that. You've told me what happened in that WrestleMania you had with him. The guy is a brick. He will NEVER change."

"Well, I was a brick, too," Willow conceded with a sour smile. "We were young, arrogant, full of ourselves and we thought we knew everything. We were both immature as hell. And we weren't willing to compromise or give in to the other person. We both had egos the size of Mt. Everest back then."

Dev gave her a wide-eyed look. "And you think that's changed in him? A man? Really?"

Willow laughed a little, seeing the derision in Dev's gaze. "Probably not. But I don't know. The last year, Shep's emails have been, well... kinder... maybe more sensitive, thinking of someone other than himself. That's matriarchal, you know: putting your partner first over yourself? Maybe he's learning how to share and compromise?"

Snorting, Dev rose and rolled her eyes. "He was NEVER sensitive toward anyone! You think he's really changed that much?"

"Haven't you changed in the last three years?" Willow asked mildly, seeing Dev's face scrunch up like a sour grape.

"Hell no. I like myself just the way I am."

Willow snickered and said nothing. Her friend had changed over the last year she'd

been with her. She didn't dare say that she was softening with age. Maybe Dev didn't see or recognize it, but Willow did. But then again, Willow had always been more self-aware than most people. Except when it came to Shep Porter. Damn, but he'd been the best sex she'd ever had. He was an incredible lover. Those times of tossed sheets and tangled toes had been the ONLY moments he'd been sensitive toward her; wanting to please her as much as she wanted to please him. Willow could never figure out why their kindness, their love and passion for one another, never translated beyond the bedroom door. It was like they became different people whenever the sexual haze of need enveloped them versus the way they were together in their everyday combat world. She could never figure out the Jekyll-Hyde changes they made between the two of their realities. "Well," she said, lifting her empty cup in Dev's direction, "grab me another as well when you go get yourself a refill? Thanks."

"That's the easiest thing I'll do today," Dev grumbled, grabbing her cup.

What to do? Willow felt her heart stir, which surprised her. She was over Shep Porter. Did she enjoy the email jpeg photos he'd send her maybe once every couple of months? With some text that was not rabid, defensive or in some way trying to intimidate her? Yes, she always felt mildly uplifted when she saw his email and photos appear. He was big on photos because, as a civil engineer, he was always taking his digital camera out at some construction site or another and snapping pics for the work logs. He was meticulous and careful, and she knew he was a damn good manager of his military construction team.

She had seen through his snapshots, bit by bit, that the people who worked under his authority loved him. Well, she'd fallen in love with him too. At least, in the bedroom. Outside of it? Hell reigned. And why? Why? Willow could never figure that out as much as she tried. Shep was a good person with a good heart or she wouldn't have fallen for the guy in the first place.

When they came together outside the bedroom? It was like throwing oil on a fire. It

was explosive. And Willow didn't like fighting. She fought enough as a combat pilot in the air. She didn't need it on the ground after she landed.

She pushed away the red tendrils that lurked at the corners of her eyes and cheeks and tucked them behind her ears for the hundredth time today. They wouldn't stay there long, however, because of how thick and naturally wavy her hair was. Her hair was like her; it had a mind of its own.

Dev came back, setting the mug of steaming black coffee in front of her.

"Tell me you're not seriously contemplating letting Porter back into your life?" She sat down, tucking one leg beneath her body once more.

"I am," Willow admitted, seeing Dev's eyes go wide with shock.

"Why?"

"Because this is about more than us as ex-husband and wife. I hope I've matured and grown enough to look at the bigger, more important picture."

"Which is?"

She smiled at Dev's disbelief. "Which is why did we even start working undercover for Delos in the first place? It was to be of help somewhere in the world. To stop the suffering. Right?"

"Yes, that much I'll agree with you on."

Willow knew Dev's childhood had been an unmitigated nightmare. Her father, the sick sexual predator he was, had started fondling Dev from six years old onward until she was ten, when she'd fought back. Softening her voice, Willow said, "We both

know that other people have helped us when we've been knocked to our knees, Dev. And because we've personally had that experience, we want to turn around and help others. We know what it's like to be abused, disrespected, and seen as little more than sub-human, less important than a goat or donkey in third world cultures. Maybe not in the same way these third world countries do, but we understand enough through our own experiences."

Mouth quirking, Dev said, "Yeah, you're right. So? You're really seriously contemplating letting Porter come here?"

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“And what if I did tell Wyatt no?” Willow challenged her, opening her hands. “What if he sends us some other patriarchal male asshole who is truly a pain in our collective asses?”

“What? Is this like the evil you know is better than choosing an evil you don’t know?”

Willow nodded, pursing her full lips. “Yes, that’s how I see it. Shep is a known quantity to me. I know where the potholes are with him and they’re all in the personal playing field, not in my professional life or duties. We’re not coming together as ex-lovers this time. He’s coming here to serve the downtrodden just like we do. There’s mutual agreement on that point.”

“Yeah,” Dev muttered derisively, sipping her coffee, “there’s the monkey wrench in the works. Is Porter really over you? Are you over him? Or are you going to fall to the lowest common denominator with one another and start your cat-and-dog fights all over again after you leave the bedroom?”

“No, I wouldn’t do that. This is strictly professional. There’s no bedroom scene.”

“You might not think that, but he could.”

“That’s the unanswered question, isn’t it?” She compressed her lips and sat up. “I’m going to call Wyatt on the sat phone and talk with him directly. That’s what I’ll hinge my final decision on.”

“Well,” Dev said, “if Porter can’t be mature, keep it on a professional, detached level,

then it's gonna bleed out on everyone, Willow, not just on you two. And that's a bad outcome. You know that."

"Yeah, I agree with you and I know that." replied Willow. "I wouldn't compromise this assignment and helping those villages like that, Dev."

"Geez," Dev muttered, "this sucks. It's not like we aren't gonna be pushing balls to the wall on this assignment, Willow. We're gonna be working overtime all the time. Shield needs to give us a big raise or hire two more pilots to help relieve some of the workload we've taken on."

"According to the schedule Wyatt sent us, that's not quite true. The buildup to getting everything flown out to the first village will require us to put a lot of extra flight hours in. We'll max out our flying time and he knows that. The timesheet allows for that. But once we get the supplies, equipment and people flown into a given village, things will slow down for us to a degree."

"Until we need to move everyone to the next village. This feels like that movie 'Groundhog Day'."

Willow smiled a little. "Well? You were bitching a couple of months ago that you were growing bored and that you needed more flight time. Now? You'll get that time in spades. So? Which do you want worse?"

Dev gave her an evil grin. "I'm a tough one to please, ain't I?"

Willow wasn't fooled by her Tennessee drawl. Sometimes, Dev wanted people to think she was slow and stupid, which of course, was the antithesis of her. It was a ploy she'd learned at a very early age and one that had saved her several times. She could hide behind her soft, pleasing southern drawl when she wanted to, like a chameleon deciding who to be for any given person or situation she had to deal with.

Did they get the stupid version or the super-intelligent woman that Dev really was? Who knew? Willow had seen all the sides to Dev over the year they'd worked together. "No, you're really easy to get along with," Willow said, giving her a warm, sincere look.

Dev was twenty-nine years old, making Willow a year younger than her. But at times, Dev's life history made her seem decades older than Willow herself. The predatory incest, the sickness and dysfunction of Dev's poverty-stricken Tennessee household, had matured her in ways Willow could not fathom. But she knew the chinks in Dev's well-worn armor. Of course, Willow had her own set. And chinks in it, too. All women had them. A lot of them.

"Listen, I need to have the security list of soldiers, their names, and the times they'll be at the warehouse. Is it ready?"

"Almost." Dev unwound from her scrunched position on the chair and walked to the opened door. "Make your call to Wyatt," she said. "And I'll get the papers together at my condo and bring them over to you in about an hour. By then, you'll know the outcome of that call, and your decision?"

"Yep," Willow promised. She watched Dev disappear and heard her condo door open and close. Her throat was tight with tension, and she felt more emotion than she wanted to admit to rising in her chest. Picking up the satellite phone, she dialed in Wyatt's number. Might as well get this over with. Willow wasn't sure what she would decide. It all hinged on Wyatt's talk with Shep earlier. He wanted to come over here. But was she prepared for it at all? She hated indecision, and usually wasn't one to hesitate in the slightest. As a combat pilot, indecision could get people killed. Feelings stirred deep within her, ones she'd tried for three years to ignore.

"Lockwood here."

“Wyatt? This is Willow Chamberlin. I wanted to speak to you.”

“Good to hear from you, Willow. You obviously got my file and email?”

“Yep,” she said, resting her arm on the desk.

“Was it a shock to you?”

She smiled a little. “Minor earthquake, Wyatt.”

“Okay, so what’s your down-and-dirty on this situation?”

“You tell me. You talked to Shep. Right?”

“Yes, we had a mission briefing with him yesterday. He knows you’ll be intimately involved in all phases of this assignment as the pilot-in-command.”

“What was his reaction?”

“Surprise. But I don’t feel in a bad way.”

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“Uncomfortable?”

“Yeah, I’d go so far as to say that.”

“You’re an ex-SEAL. I know you have intuition amped up your ass and back down to your socks. What’s your feel on his reaction?” Willow was going to put the screws to Wyatt. She liked the Texas cowboy’s laid-back nature.

“Honestly? I felt his discomfort was more about him than you. I think he feels that he’s matured, that three years of water under the bridge can allow him to work professionally with you, and not get trapped in your collective past.”

“Hmmm.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s going to be an adjustment,” she said more to herself than him. “I’m okay with it because, God knows, these people need all the help they can get. That local gang, Tefere David’s one, is a thorn in everyone’s side. I know the general has his men trying to find the bastard, but he’s really causing a lot of pain and suffering here in the provinces, Wyatt. We honestly need that ten-foot-high cyclone fence with razor wire strung across the top of it to protect all those Delos schools and charities. David is targeting the charity because we have food, water and money at each site. And one of these days? He’s either going to kill the employees or he’ll start kidnapping the children or teachers, holding them for high ransom or he’ll behead them.”

“I hear you, Willow. So? You think you can get beyond the past and deal with Porter

on a professional level, then? It sounds like it, but you need to tell me.”

“Is Shep in a relationship presently?”

“Not that I know of, but we never discussed that aspect of it. On his resume he put ‘single’ if that counts. Most of the civil engineers in our employ are single or divorced. They go out on a year-long assignment like this one. They can’t bring their loved ones along with them because of the dangers involved in the countries we work in. So, everyone else I know of in that division does not have a family, nor are they in a serious relationship presently.”

“I know the type,” Willow said. Shep had always had one-night stands before meeting her, not any long-term relationships, he’d said, because of the moving around that he had to do for his job. Military engineers were tumbleweeds in Willow’s opinion; footloose and fancy free.

“So?” Wyatt challenged in his best Texas drawl, “what do you think, Willow? Want to take that pony out for another spin? Try him out?”

She smiled, always loving his Texas colloquialisms. “Sure, but what if it doesn’t work?”

“I told Shep, just like I’m tellin’ you, that if it gets to be too much, if you or he can’t keep it at a professional level? To call me. We’ll get a replacement for him and he’ll fly out of your life, simple as that.”

“I needed to hear that from you. I love what I do here, Wyatt. I don’t want to leave. Dev and I are a good team and we do good work here.”

“Yes, and we don’t want that disrupted, Willow. You’re committed and we appreciate everything you and Dev bust your asses over for Delos. If this goes south?

It will be Porter who will be asked to leave. Not you two. Okay?"

A load slid off her shoulders. "Yeah."

He laughed. "It's kinda tough to find any pilots who love dirt strips out in the middle of nowhere," he drawled, teasing her. "We'll keep paying the toll for you two ladies. You're the best."

She laughed a little. "Thanks for the compliment." Willow had a dream of living in Oregon, in the gorgeous Cascade Mountain Range, hiring an architect to create a cedar log cabin for her. That dream was her future, and her nest egg was growing well enough, but not even close to hatching right now.

"Okay, then, pardner, let's make this official. You're saying yes to Porter coming over there?"

She swallowed a little, convulsively, her heart suddenly taking off in an unexpected flutter. "Yes, I am."

"You know he still looks like a California surfin' dude, still has that short beard, and tousled hair. I think he likes not having to shave daily."

"He was like that back at Bagram, never shaved often and they never got after him."

"That's because he was a good leader and manager of people in a pigsty situation. He was, and still is, a good officer, in my opinion."

"I guess I'll keep my surfboard jokes out of our conversations," she said.

"Lake Tana ain't no surfing kind of place," Wyatt agreed, with a chuckle. "Still, he's the surfer dude by looks, but I sense he's matured a lot since you two broke up."

Just my SEAL intuition, now, you understand?”

“SEAL intuition is gold in my world,” she promised him. “Thanks for the update on him, Wyatt. I feel things will be okay between us. Three years is a long time. Most people mature over time.”

Chuckling, Wyatt said, “Women mature far more than any man.”

“No kidding,” and she laughed, ending the call.

CHAPTER 3

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Willow tried to steady her heartbeat as she and Dev waited on the tarmac of Dejazmach Belay Zeleke Airport in Bahir Dar, standing in the long shadow of the control tower. The sun had barely risen, the September dawn a coolish fifty-two degrees Fahrenheit. It had rained the night before and Lake Tana in the distance looked a beautiful blue, as if clear of the pollution from the city proper to the northwest. The humidity was high.

Willow's blood had thinned long ago, and the coolness had made her wear her favorite old denim jacket over her green flight suit. She'd braided her hair, so it hung in one long rope down her back, her olive-green baseball cap in place with the Delos insignia on the front, one arm of her aviator sunglasses hooked into the v of the zipper of her half-opened jacket. Dev shifted restlessly, from one flight boot to the other. She wasn't one to stay still for long. They watched as the C-130 Hercules transport plane landed, the red and yellow horizontal stripes down the length of its fuselage, denoting it a Delos aircraft. Up on the tail section was the institute's rising sun logo, representing hope; a bare glimpse of light dawning on the horizon after the long, dark night of need the poverty-stricken here had sheltered through.

In Willow's hand was a clipboard holding the flight manifest with all the names of the people on board. On the flight, there were fourteen Shield Security team personnel, disguised as Delos security staff, and twenty undercover US Navy Seabee construction crew members, Shep Porter among them. What did he look like now, as opposed to what she remembered from three years ago? They had sent emails back and forth, but not any photos specifically of one another attached. The emails had always been brief and fairly impersonal. She watched the plane touch down on its tricycle gear and heard Dev's low sigh under the sharp, brief screech from the rear tires. Smiling, Willow turned to her.

“Like old times, huh? Almost feels like we’re back in country again.”

Dev grinned and took off her green baseball cap, moving her fingers nervously through her ponytailed hair. “Yeah, no kidding. I thought we were done with bullets flying, here in Ethiopia, but now, what with David stirring up trouble and all, it feels like we’re in Afghanistan again.”

Nodding, Willow watched the C-130 anchor at the end of the runway, and then slowly turn, the shrieking, whistling sound of the four prop engines filling the air as it headed toward the parking area near the tower and rows of hangars. There was a passenger ramp on wheels, standing by for the transport plane to come to a halt. In actuality, the entire rear of the plane would open up and be one big disembarking ramp, but the local guys didn’t know that. Two airport staffers stood ready, watching the C-130 lumber toward them. Once it was parked, engines off, chocks would be thrown beneath the wheels to keep it from moving. She was sure everyone on board had already been told to exit via the rear ramp once the plane halted in the revetment area.

“Damn, it’s cold,” Dev griped.

“Weather desk said low of fifty-two and high of seventy-three today.” Willow looked up at the turbulent, quickly changing sky. “We got garbage can cumulus right now, which means the end of the front has come through. Maybe by noon you’ll warm up as these clouds leave and the sun shines down on us once again.”

“One can hope.”

Dev was always the pessimist. Always dark. But she had been born into a dark, severely dysfunctional family, so Willow understood how she saw the world through that murky, dirty lens. She was sure the day would warm up nicely, a good welcome to Ethiopia for all those people on board the Delos C-130 trundling like a pregnant

cow toward them.

“You nervous?” Dev asked.

“Yeah, a little,” Willow admitted grudgingly.

“The great unknown always digs up our fear,” Dev said, nodding. “At least Wyatt Lockwood thinks your ex has matured and will be a professional.”

“I’m hoping that’s true,” Willow agreed. Her hands tightened a little as the whistling of the four engines on the C-130 drew closer. The two airport crewmen waved their bright-orange light sticks, indicating where the pilot was to bring the transport to a halt. The air was filled with that shrieking ear-splitting and hurting whistle. In no time, the aircraft halted, all engines cut and props slowing down, the painful sound dissolving. Willow’s throat grew dry as she watched the rear ramp slowly open up and start to disgorge the many passengers.

To her surprise, she suddenly wanted to cry. Her! She rarely cried. She’d cried for days after leaving Shep. Some of those tears were of rage and frustration that he couldn’t bend, couldn’t compromise, couldn’t try to be flexible with her. How lost she’d been that first year after they’d divorced. She’d cried some more when the divorce papers were served. And when they came back to her, signed, it only compounded her grief.

Wiping her mouth out of sheer nervousness, Willow felt shaky all over inside. Even her knees felt momentarily weak and unsure. Part of her wanted to run away and not meet Shep after three years of his absence. Another part wanted to run TOWARD him! That realization shocked Willow. As she stood there, watching the people trundling down the ramp, she felt like she was careening every which way emotionally, could almost feel herself lofting and diving, as if on a plane of her own that she had lost control of. There were fusions of paired emotions of heady joy

connected with rage, and grief entwined with hope, and a final spare, all-on-its-lonesome one of longing for Shep. Why hadn't they been able to make the compromises? What was wrong with them? Look at the result.

Standing rock-solid, but not feeling so, the sky overhead a patchwork of clouds, showing through them the blue of the Ethiopian dawn and the rising sun, Willow took another deep, serrating breath. In times of fear and trepidation she would mentally and emotionally shore herself up by simply willing it away. Her knees tightened and she felt more stable inside, her gaze riveted on that ramp. Willow was sure Shep would be among the first people out because he was the boss of the entire operation.

Sure enough, she saw him emerge, wearing a bright-red nylon coat over a dark-green t-shirt, jeans and roughout boots. He still wore his hair down over his ears, very un-Marine like, slightly curled, and that five-to-ten-day growth of beard. He got away with such choices because he was here undercover, but his surfer dude look hadn't changed a bit, and she felt a warmth in her chest. Such typical faire for a civilian engineer, her mind clocked. The cover was working. He was tall: six foot three inches, roughly around two hundred pounds of lean, hard muscle. Even at this distance in the dawn light, she could see that Shep was deeply tanned from all the time he spent in the sun. If he was anywhere even near an ocean, she was sure he was surfboarding on off hours; he never lost his love of the sport. He wore a Delos brown baseball cap with their rising sun logo on the front. The bill was up enough that Willow could see his face fully as he turned his attention her way.

And then, their gazes locked.

A spasm of grief roared through Willow. What had they done to one another? How much hurt had they created by walking away? But what were the options? There had been none. Shep's azure gaze scanned hers as he hesitated fractionally at the bottom where the ramp met the concrete revetment area, holding her image for that split second. Willow felt so much, as if back in that freaky mental telepathy mode they

seemed to always have with one another. As if it had just been reactivated. He moved with such natural male grace. Shep had grown up in La Jolla, California, where his father owned and ran a construction company. He'd lived in a house less than half a mile from the Pacific Ocean and had started surfing when he was nine years old. And that was what had first drawn her to him: his youth, his wildness, his love of the ocean, and watching him tame it with his ever-present surfboard. Yes, he was a gorgeous-looking man, no question. But it had become so much more than that, and Willow could feel herself absorbing his deep, searching look, as if he were trying to touch her mind and heart all in that split-second gaze.

And then, he broke eye contact with her, turning and waiting for the rest of his people to disgorge. He was a damn fine boss, and manager of people in general. She had loved that part of him. He watched as each person come down the ramp. Yes, no question, Shep was a focused, responsible leader. For once, as an Air Force officer, it had been nice for Willow to set that role aside in Afghanistan and be in Shep's arms and his care. When they'd lain in bed, talking, touching, kissing and exploring one another on every possible level, she'd fallen so quickly for the man. And he'd fallen just as quickly for her. They were a mutual admiration society, keeping their private lives private at the busy Army air base.

The group assembled. It was time to go meet them. Willow felt as if she were in some dream-time movie, and this wasn't real. As she forced her feet forward, Dev at her side, the clipboard gripped in her left hand, she floated out-of-body. Heart aching without relief, Willow felt as if someone had stolen the air out of her lungs. She struggled to breathe, struggled to remained grounded and focused.

Three years.

Three years without Shep's tender touches.

Three years without his rich, deep laughter as they shared a joke together.

Three years without his tall male body curved around hers as she slept.

As a lover, she'd never had anyone better than Shep. To say she swooned as he played her body with his touches and kisses, was an understatement. Even now, her lower body warmed with memory. And need.

How to be professional? They'd fought like hell, but the making up had been out of this world. She still woke up some nights from torrid dreams of Shep joined with her, loving her, taking her with him to some unknown galaxy where they both languished in carnal pleasure together. Now, she had to put on her game face, as the military referred to it. Be all business.

How the hell was he going to keep a straight face? Shep could feel himself unraveling deep within and it was because Willow was walking across the tarmac toward him. In the three years since he'd seen her in person? She had grown even more beautiful. He was an engineer. His whole life was about noticing subtle details and missing nothing. She had flawless gold-green eyes the color of newly birthed willow leaves in early spring. Her mother had named her such for that very reason. Just from the gentle sway of her hips, the set of her chin, a burning confidence radiated around her like blinding sunlight. That flight suit hid her best assets and the palms of his hands literally itched for a second, in memory of them on her smooth, firm flesh. He had it BAD. A lot worse than he'd first believed. Three years, he realized with stunning and sudden clarity, seemed now like only days since he'd last seen Willow.

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He couldn't ignore the frizzy red tendrils that always caressed her temples, and those high cheekbones of hers. That untamable red hair was more than just a sign about her personality, it was an absolute symbol. Willow was fiery, willful, assertive and her confidence was a turn on to him. She walked like she owned the whole damned world even now. Her shoulders were thrown back with natural pride and her gaze was focused like a laser on him. She didn't blink. Hell, she was a combat pilot. Why would she blink when she was in the midst of a dangerous fray? There was NOTHING, dammit, that turned him off to her as she walked with purpose toward him and his following team.

Willow never wore makeup. In fact, she disdained it as Shep recalled from one of their after-sex talks. It was the time he'd enjoyed the most, feeling exhausted physically, but his mind crisp and clear and centered on sensual, wild and untamable Willow. She had been his wife. How many times had he awakened in the middle of the night in some foreign country, wondering why the hell they'd split up and divorced? She had enriched his life, made it exciting, unexpected and spontaneous. He was none of those things without her. As an engineer, he was a man absorbed in the details of numbers, measurements, building things and making them work correctly. Willow walked into his life that one night at Bagram and blew his world to smithereens and he'd never looked back.

Her red braid lay against her back and he realized she had allowed it to grow even longer after divorcing him. As a combat pilot, wearing a helmet all the time, she'd kept her hair mid-length between her shoulder blades. Now? Three years later and a civilian, her long hair stirred his desire, and his fingers itched to tangle themselves in that frizzy mass that crinkled in the Lake Tana humidity. Sweat was beginning to stain his long-sleeved khaki shirt even at this coolish time at dawn. He excused

himself from his people, who were led away by the airport attendees, and he walked toward the two women pilots.

Shep didn't know the other woman, but she had the look of eagles in her gray eyes. Nothing to mess with was the intuitive warning he got off the copilot who flew with Willow. There was a dangerousness to that woman, but things were distracting him too much for Shep to hone in on the sense any further than that. Both women wore holsters with .45s in them. A reminder that Ethiopia was not a safe place in many respects.

Shep took the lead, extending his hand to her as they slowed. "Willow? Nice to see you again." He was SUCH a liar! He wanted to grab her, kiss her senseless and then carry her off to a bed where they'd slide into sexual oblivion together. Her fingers met his, slightly damp, long and beautiful, nails cut blunt. So many little things slammed into Shep as her fingers closed around his work-roughened, calloused hand. Remembering on one dawn that was crawling up into the night sky and chasing it away, Willow telling him she hated fingernail polish. She felt it was like putting a toxic poison on her nails that would be absorbed into her body. It was horrid stuff. A hundred small, everyday actions and reactions between them when they were married, slammed through him. Her fingers curved around his, not weakly, not overly strong either, but a solid connection, nevertheless. He saw something in her eyes, some momentary flicker of emotion in them that she quickly covered up.

"Nice to see you, Shep." She quickly released his hand, as if burned. Turning, Willow said, "I want you to meet my copilot, Dev Mitchell."

Dev stepped up, shaking his hand firmly. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Porter. Welcome to Ethiopia."

"Call me Shep," he insisted, "and thanks for the welcome. I know you ladies are really busy with details you don't normally have to deal with."

Willow pulled up her clipboard and said, “We’ve divided our duties to get your two groups some downtime and rest, to get over the jet lag, after they finish their passport stamping inside the terminal.” She turned, pointing at three bright-yellow school busses parked along the curb of the airport terminal outside the chain-link fence behind them. “Dev is going to take your security and construction teams to a nearby hotel where they can rest up, get a shower and some food. They’ll stay there until tomorrow morning.” She lifted her gaze from the clipboard. “You have a condo rented for you and your head of security. It will be in the same building Dev and I have our condos. That way, you’ll have ease of communication with us whenever you come back to Bahir Dar for a few days R&R from your construction assignment.”

Shep nodded. Willow was all business, but he couldn’t help but allow her low, smoky-toned voice to drift through him like a lover’s caress. He didn’t know if she was in a relationship presently or not. The emails they’d sporadically shared with one another never touched upon their personal lives. He had always had an almost psychic connection with her and, right now? She was wrestling with a lot of unseen emotions. But so was he. In one way? He felt like a giddy teen with this woman who turned him inside out in the best of ways. In another? Deep regret that they’d split up, both of them immature in different ways, bull-headed and too stubborn to compromise for the other. Willow had walked out on him. She had demanded the divorce, not him. Sadness filled him as she went crisply down the line on a lot of other issues that needed to be sorted and decided upon.

“Well, that’s it,” Willow said. “Do you have feedback?”

“Yeah, I’m fine with how you’ve structured this mass movement of personnel. Everyone is whipped and they need sleep and food.”

Nodding, Willow turned to Dev. “Rock it out, huh?”

Dev grinned, her clipboard ready. “Roger that,” and she took off to the awaiting

groups who were beginning to file out into the passenger debarkation area.

How desperately Shep wanted to push through that hard barrier that Willow held up between them, but he understood, he thought, why it was there. She was either in a relationship with another man, which was none of his business, or, she still had feelings for him. Not necessarily good ones, either. When they'd first met, she'd had that same tough shield in place, as if to protect herself from the men who constantly hit on her at Bagram Fixed Wing Ops. She was beautiful, her red hair made her stand out, and every male in that building always noticed her, right or wrong. Only, he got lucky and was able to dissolve that first wall between them over time. And the woman that had been beneath that shield had blown his world, as he'd known it, completely apart. Willow had meant everything to him. She WAS his world. And, if he dared plumb the depths of his emotions, she still was. No woman since her had even begun to compare. He swallowed hard.

"Where do you need me, Willow? Or do you want me to do something else?"

"No, you're with me. You'll ride with me in our car, that silver KIA SUV out there in the lot. I'll take you back to your condo so you can rest. Dev is going to handle your passport stuff inside, and the logistics of moving everyone else from here to the hotel. She'll make sure they're taken care of."

Nodding, Shep turned, "My head of security is an ex-SEAL, Luke Gibson. He'll probably have questions."

"Then, let's go over, single him out and we'll put our heads together," Willow suggested, already taking off toward the group.

Shep easily caught up with her and then shortened his stride to remain at her shoulder. The temperature was in the fifties and she was wearing a heavy denim jacket over her flight suit. She had always looked so carefree. Such a risk taker. None

of that had changed from what he could see. He yearned to have some quiet downtime with her in private but knew well enough at least to keep his mouth shut about their past. And he wasn't going to let anyone know about it on either team, although he knew Luke was aware. But Luke was black ops; he wasn't gonna say shit. It was on a need-to-know basis only. Shep had made that clear from the start when they'd had a second meeting with Luke at Shield Security. One out of several briefings that had followed.

Once they'd singled Luke out, Shep made introductions. He felt a bit of jealousy as he saw Luke's game face falter for a moment when Willow shook his hand. He instantly felt like a male lion protecting his lioness, but then he harshly reminded himself to stand down. Jealousy had been one of his weaknesses as Willow had heatedly pointed out to him time and again during their rugged two-year marriage. What he'd never told her was that his father had had an affair that had destroyed his mother. They'd then divorced and his mother Bess, a well-known children's book illustrator, had taken care of him, loosely speaking, on her own. He had been thirteen at the time. And he'd seen his mother slowly falter and die before his eyes. It had served to put Shep on notice that men weren't to be trusted in a marriage situation. He'd grown up thinking his parents were forever, but they weren't. And it had wounded him in a way that played into his marriage with Willow. And now, dammit, that green-eyed monster within him was back on red alert over the way Luke had looked at Willow.

"I'll be riding back to the condo with Flight Officer Mitchell," Luke told them. "See you then, Shep."

Nodding, Shep was relieved. It would be just him and Willow. Alone. And there was so damned much he wanted to share with her. One of her main issues with him was that he was too self-centered, that he never asked how she was, what was she thinking, or commit in other ways to any real communication between them. But this time, Shep was determined to at least show Willow he could be unselfish and share,

and communicate with her. That was something he could fix. What he couldn't fix was her broken heart or his. That was the pain he felt in his chest, and he'd thought nothing would make it go away. But it had when their hands had touched, and he'd gently squeezed her fingers. Getting to touch her had been a thrill. Heat had tunneled through his heart.

The clouds were lessening over the busy airport. Porters brought the luggage out to the front of the building as people began sifting through the bags, finding their own, and moving toward the awaiting, assigned busses. Shep found his two dark-green canvas duffle bags and gripped one in each hand. They were damned heavy, but that couldn't be helped. He followed Willow to her SUV parked outside the guarded fence. He saw passengers from a British Airways flight disgorging and several families of locals crossing the two-lane asphalt road, hurrying into the airport to meet them. There were big palm trees and a lot of jungle-like greenery around. Ethiopia sat a bit north of the Equator and the Northern Provinces, where Tana Lake was, were the coolest areas of the country. Shep was glad. He'd run construction crews for years in the hot, unforgiving deserts of Afghanistan before the U.S. had erased their presence from that country.

The smells in the air were of jet fuel mixed with the mouth-watering aroma of some kind of bread baking, perking his tummy's attention. The women were beautiful in his eyes, different shades of ebony to mahogany, the colorful saris, and hajibs they wore making them look like dazzling, colorful tropical birds. He followed Willow, appreciating her from behind. Once, his hands had freely roamed her body, lavishing her with pleasure. She was as untamable as that naturally curly red hair of hers. A part of her was still a wild child, there was no doubt, but that part of Willow only came out to play when he allowed his own self to become loosened up and playful. So often, as she'd accused him regularly toward the end of their marriage, he was always serious, always away, lost in his head and his damnable engineer logic, and not in his heart. He was closed up tighter than Fort Knox, she'd told him many times. Willow was loose, free, risk-taking, empathetic, and he was the opposite. At least she

had stopped just short of calling him anal.

Willow unlocked the very dusty silver SUV, much in need of a wash, but no one washed their cars here. She opened the rear hatchback door, allowing Shep to heft his bags into it.

“Thanks,” he said, catching her gaze as she stood to one side.

“What?” she drawled. “You think I’m not going to be my old self around you? Did you think I’d make you open the hatchback on your own?”

He grinned wearily, watching that shield of hers thin, amusement darting in her green eyes for a split second. Relief swept through him. He didn’t want her ice-queen game face on all the time. “I was hoping you’d be your old self when we were alone,” he admitted, grateful, settling the second duffle bag into the cargo area. He pulled the hatchback down, latching it in place. A bare three feet separated them but to Shep, it might as well have been the Grand Canyon yawning between Willow and himself.

With a snort, she muttered, “I didn’t change that much over time, Porter.”

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His heart swelled with so many unexpected emotions. “That’s good to hear, Willow,” and he deliberately walked around her and opened the driver’s side door for her. For a second, she stood, her lips parting, eyes widening. He’d always insisted on being a gentleman. Yes, even in this day and age? He opened doors for women. Standing there, he struggled not to grin fully. “Well? Are you driving? Or maybe, I’ll drive, and you can tell me where we’re going? I have an international driver’s license.”

That challenge startled Willow. “Like hell!” she growled so only he could hear it, scowling and striding up to the door.

Shep stepped back, giving her space. Willow wasn’t a person to be crowded. Ever. That red hair was a warning about her temper, too. He saw a mix of amusement, shock and merriment in her expression. She was allowing him to see her. Maybe not all of her, but more than he’d ever expected at this first meeting. His heart soared with hope.

Once they were both in the SUV, she started it up and drove quickly out of the parking lot, heading through the palm-lined streets and weaving in and out of the early morning traffic with a confidence born from familiarity. She had the windows all down.

“It’s too cold for air conditioning, but the humidity will get you,” she explained.

“That’s fine.” He obliquely studied her out of the corner of his eye. Willow had classic model features in his opinion. Her nose was long and cleanly shaped. Her broad, high cheekbones were the foothills sloping up to her large, damned-intelligent eyes that missed nothing. Her long crimson lashes were the perfect frame for her

nearly unearthly green eyes. As his gaze dropped to her lips, he couldn't stop from feeling his body stirring whether he wanted it to or not. It had a mind of its own, as Willow had often accused him. That was true. That was the only safe port in their marriage that had gone right all the time, every time: sharing sex. They'd never taken their anger or any other luggage to bed with them. Well, "bed" in the figurative sense. He used to have been tied to the idea that the literal bed was where people had sex. But with Willow, any place, so long as it was private, was an opportunity. He almost smiled in memory of that. She was an opportunist of the finest kind, opening him up to other creative possibilities. When she'd first met him, she'd accused him of being ultra-conservative because he was an engineer. Shep had had no defense on that one, because it was true. Most engineers were exactly that: conservative, careful, looked before they leaped, and lived in their heads, ignoring their emotional apparatus, unlike women like her.

"How are you?" he asked, tipping his head in her general direction. Instantly, Shep saw her soft mouth thin. Her hands tightened around the steering wheel as she contemplated his quietly asked question.

"I'm okay. How about you?"

He wasn't put off by the sudden tension in her voice or by feeling those shields of hers come back up into place. "I'm okay."

She gave him a look, shaking her head. "You're lying, Porter."

"So are you, Chamberlin."

A sour grin edged one corner of his wide mouth. She sped through a yellow light, going way faster than she should. Taking her foot off the accelerator for a moment, she added, "Just like old times."

The hurt rolled through him. “Yeah, old times.” Bad times. Painful, agonizing times he never wanted to ever revisit. Now, he knew what his mother had gone through when his father had that affair and had come home one afternoon and told her he wanted a divorce. His mother had crumpled in shock and agony. Shep realized that he had repeated what he thought was probably a similar pattern to the daily, ongoing pain of his parents’ fractured relationship, and that ripped him up inside.

His mother had lost her job as an illustrator for a major publishing house. The sudden absence of her husband had emotionally destroyed her. He’d never been any kind of warm, loving dad to Shep who went on to punch his fair share of walls, raging at what the bastard had done to his innocent mother. She had died shortly after he turned eighteen, right when he was getting ready to go off to college. He’d buried his father six months later. It had been a raw time in his life. These were things he’d never talked to Willow about. In fact, after sex, her favorite time, they talked only about her, her family, her risky adventures as a young girl, but he never spoke about his parents and the first eighteen years of his life. And often, Willow would become pissed because he always shut that particular door in her face, refusing to talk about it. The single biggest reason for why she walked out on him was because he refused to communicate on that kind of personal and emotional level with her.

You’re like a robot, Shep, she had heatedly accused him. All head, no heart. If I’d wanted to marry something with no heart, no feelings and emotions, I would have hooked up with a damned doorknob! You’re flesh and blood. What the hell happened to you to make you so fucking closed up and unavailable even to ME?

He’d heard the argument often from her, feeling backed into a corner where there was no escape from the red-haired harridan who was on a mission to split him wide open so he’d spill his dark, twisted, wounded emotional guts to her. That’s all she’d wanted; to share their lives, their ups and downs, and to be able to hold onto and cry with one another in the bad times, and laugh in the good ones. But he’d frozen up, and Shep had known it’d been driving her away from him. He’d been too fearful of

opening up for so many reasons. Not to mention his greatest fear, the one that came true: that Willow would walk out on him. Just like his father had walked out on his mother, Bess. But she hadn't done it because of some affair like his father had. She'd done it because she felt married to a heartless robot.

Shep wasn't an idiot. He knew why this brief interaction with Willow had brought all those submerged memories and feelings bubbling up to the surface. He made a fierce internal effort to choke it all back down, and looked out of the car's window at the unravelling view for cover;

The city of Bahir Dur was busy and he saw some donkeys pulling carts, men hurrying along toward work, the day just beginning in this Ethiopian city by the largest lake in the country. He could smell the lake, the odor of rotting fish and the dank humidity rolling in across the smooth water. There was pain rolling off Willow as well, and he could feel it as sharply as a knife scoring his heart. He had loved... still loved... this woman. And, at all costs, he didn't want to purposely hurt her again. God knew, he'd already screwed that up royally in the past. "I'm going to try to be better at communication with you this time around," he told her, glancing over at her, watching for her reaction.

For a moment, Willow gave a slow blink, tilted her head in his direction and met his eyes briefly, then returned to driving the bustling morning streets of the city. She licked her lower lip. Her hands tightened around the wheel for an instant but then she forced herself to relax.

"It's taken you three years to finally admit that?"

Shep winced inwardly, hearing the raw emotion in her low voice, the hurt, the hours of arguments, the tension and her crying. He couldn't stand to see her cry because it meant he'd hurt her and dammit, he loved her. Staring at her profile brought a violent need for her, entwined with the love he still held for her. He had no idea how much

he'd buried for three years until right now. It felt like he was on an out-of-control roller coaster. One moment a flash of a happy memory would hit him and then, in the next breath, the dark agony of splitting up, the divorce and loss of Willow. When she left, his life became a gray, ongoing, unrelieved daily mission just to survive.

It mirrored his past. His life as a teen had continued to spiral out of control. There had been a court battle shortly after the divorce, and Shep had been given over into the custody of his mother. All he could do was visit his father now and then, but later, he left California with his new family, moving back East. He and his mother were too poor to fly him back and forth, and so Shep deeply lost touch with his father as a result, except for occasional emails. And not only did he lose his mother just before leaving for college, but he also lost his father from a sudden heart attack shortly after that. A heavy weight settled in his chest. As he glanced over at Willow, every cell in his being screamed that he had not wanted this to happen to them as it had to his parents. They'd spent three years apart. Now, Fate had thrown them together again.

Shep wasn't one to believe in miracles. Or even Fate. That came from his fanciful, imaginative and creative mother. She very much believed in synchronicity. It had always left a bad taste in Shep's mouth for many reasons. Despite his heart warring with his strong mentality and keen intelligence, he couldn't separate out his feelings from his brain, right now. Then, after marrying Willow, she had accused him on many occasions of being "all head and no heart." She was sitting next to him. He could smell her skin, the scent of her red hair, her favorite shampoo, the familiar plumeria fragrance. He was so close to her. And yet, so far away. Desperate, his mind moved into overdrive on how to apologize to Willow. If he did nothing else while he was with her for this construction assignment, he would give her the apology long overdue. A huge one. He was the one who'd put himself in Hell. Worse, he'd wounded this beautiful, willful, life-loving woman to the quick. If nothing else, he silently promised her, I will tell you how sorry I am for chasing you away from me.

CHAPTER 4

Willow didn't expect Shep to answer her question about it taking him three years to admit about trying to be better at communicating with her this time around. It had been the major reason she'd walked out of the marriage and away from him. She'd loved him when she'd divorced him. He'd never denied her reasons. Over the last three years, the wounds he'd inflicted with his incredible stubbornness had begun to heal. Willow had known it would take time. But, as she'd reorientated her lifestyle away from the military and back into the civilian world, she'd felt the whole process accelerate greatly. But she'd never stopped loving him, as she was discovering right now.

"Have you made peace with the fact you're a civilian now, and no longer in the military?" he asked her.

Willow swallowed her surprise. Surprise both at the uncanniness of the question's timing but even more over the simple fact that Shep had asked HER a personal question! Before? No, never; she was the one who'd always had to prod, wheedle, and push a personal feeling out of him and into the open. Maybe he was serious about trying to communicate with her? She licked her lower lip, slowing the car as she turned it into another smaller street lined with palm trees.

"After I decommissioned and left the military, I felt lost." Of course, she'd just walked out on him, too, demanding a divorce at the same time. Not wanting to quantify 'lost', she said, "I did a lot of talking to other pilots who had left the service, Shep. Most of them were going into the airline industry to fly truckloads of people from one random point to another. That's not the vision I had for myself."

He chuckled a little. "That's not your speed or your style, either. You always liked skirting edges, challenging yourself. And sitting in the pilot's seat of an airliner is about as boring as it gets."

She managed a faint smile. "You're right about that. So? I kept looking around. I saw

a Shield Security ad in an airline newsletter. They were looking for what we term ‘bush pilots’; people who would fly in supplies to third world countries where there was only a dirt strip, at best.”

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“I imagine that got your interest?”

“Yeah, it did. I called up their office, got an interview booked, and flew to Alexandria, Virginia, where they are based. I went through three different levels of interviews and, on the third one, I ended up with the president of the firm, Jack Driscoll himself.”

“I was impressed with Shield Security,” Shep said. “I was glad Delos was reaching out to one of the top agencies in the world. Considering how this mission was gonna play out, we needed real security from people who knew how to provide it.”

“When I sat down in the room and met Driscoll, I soon found out he was an ex-SEAL,” Willow fondly recapitulated. “He’d been warm and welcoming, which I hadn’t expected. But I figured out quickly if you worked for Shield, you would be treated as family, not just another number or employee.”

“Right,” he agreed, meeting her glance for a moment. “I felt the same way when the Marine Corps, working with Delos, approached me. I guess I popped up on their radar screen. I’d been selected to work undercover as a Delos employee, along with my Seabee construction crew. I went in for the interview. I’d also had no expectation of ever meeting the top dog, but there she was, right there from the git go.”

“When did you join this undercover operation with Delos?”

“Two years, eight months ago. You?”

“About the same time frame. For when I joined Shield Security I mean. I basically

went from military to civilian status and a new job within three months' time."

"No grass grows under your feet," and he saw her face thaw.

"You're a Marine officer. Why'd you decide to switch to undercover work?"

Shrugging, he said, "Even I get bored. I just wanted some peace. Something less dangerous, if possible, in my life. Delos is a global entity and frequently works with well-known security agencies and military branches. I figured they knew what they're doing and might provide what I wanted."

And that had all been shortly after she'd walked out on him. They had both left the service, but in different ways. Willow wanted to ask more, but she withheld her questions. Surprised that they were talking to one another like old friends with a common past, she found herself hungering for more of just this kind of communication. "Yeah," she murmured, "I was tired of dropping bombs. It got old after a while."

"How's your brother, Ben?"

Her heart tumbled. Ben was her older brother, two years older. This was the FIRST time that Shep had EVER asked about any member of her family. On her part, she'd opened up to him, filling him in on her family history in an effort to get him to talk about his own upbringing and kin, but he never had. "Well," she said, her voice growing low with pain, "right now? He's somewhere on the Syrian-Turkish border. He's fighting with the Kurds against ISIS. He quit the Army, even though he'd risen to the rank of a Delta Force operator, and just suddenly went to work with the Kurds." She risked a glance over at him, seeing the shock in Shep's narrowing blue eyes.

"One of the most dangerous places on the planet. Especially now, since the Russians

are in Syria along with ISIS and all we have, as a much smaller contingent over there, are our black ops special forces. Turkey considers the Kurds terrorists. That's not a good setup."

"I wanted him out of there, but he loves what he's doing," Willow muttered, frustration bleeding through her tone. Her hands opened and closed nervously on the steering wheel as she made another turn onto yet an even smaller, narrower side street. Several pink, yellow and light-green stucco condos, all four to five stories tall, stood along this meticulously clean and beautifully landscaped street.

"The last I remember you telling me about him was that he was home for R&R. He has a condo in San Diego, has a lot of SEAL friends around Coronado Island, and hangs out with them when he wants a breather from the nonstop war over there."

"That was three years ago. And that was his idea of civilian leave," she said, frowning. "Ben's thirty now. He's been a mercenary for hire to the Kurds since then."

"He must like that life?"

"I don't know. Do you remember that Ben has ADHD? That my parents had him on Ritalin until about sixteen when he flushed the medication down the toilet? He refused to ever take it again."

"I've never forgotten anything you've told me about your family," he admitted, holding her somber gaze. Not that he'd ever inquired about them, but she would fill him in on her family whether he asked or not. Another sore point about him... she'd accused him of being selfish, not caring about anyone but himself. Shep had to admit she was right. "Ben was out of control as I remember. He was in and out of juvenile detention and then got mixed up with selling drugs in his late teens. He always wanted action, couldn't sit still, and needed to be in some kind of emotional storm or drama."

“That about sums it up.” She slowed and turned into a driveway blocked by a fifteen-foot-high black wrought iron gate manned by two Ethiopian soldiers with M4s bought from the US Defense department. She pointed to the pink building in front of them as she dug out her identification, rolling down the window and handing it to the soldier on her side. “The condos on this street are all US people of some sort,” she explained to him. “They could be operatives under cover, diplomats, legit businessmen, wives whose husbands are over here in the military, and so on. General Hakym posts twenty-four-hour protection on these buildings and we’re grateful.”

“Wyatt Lockwood was saying that Hakym has a very tight, trustworthy and, ya know, loyal connection to the Ethiopian President and our State Department heads.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding to the soldier in his green uniform as he returned her ID case, saying good morning to her in broken English. Stuffing the ID into the thigh pocket of her flight suit, as the gates slowly whirred open to allow them into the complex, she said, “that’s good to know. There’s a Somalian who is called ‘Shadow Devil’. His real name is Tefere David. He’s a real hyena in case Lockwood didn’t brief you on the sick bastard.” She eased her SUV forward on the concrete driveway, heading toward the ramp sloping down into the tunnel beneath the complex that led to the underground parking area.

“Yes, I got solidly briefed on him,” Shep said. “He’s a sex-trafficker. Have you had any confrontations with him out at any of the Delos charities?”

“Yes,” she said grimly, easing the SUV into her parking space and turning off the engine. “A month ago, Dev and I landed on a dirt strip outside one of the villages about an hour after he’d attacked it.” She sighed and shook her head. “The bastard kidnapped four young girls, all around twelve and thirteen. From the village, not from within the Delos enclosure. When we drove from the strip in our Jeep and arrived at the village, all hell had broken loose. Those four families were in absolute anguish over the loss of their daughters.”

“What did you do?” and he met her pain-filled expression.

“Got on the sat phone to Delos immediately. Wyatt was there and patched us through to the State Department. They, in turn, contacted the general and he flew out a platoon of thirty soldiers to help the village and try to capture that bastard and save the girls.”

“Why the hell couldn’t he have given those outlying villages any protection?”

Sighing, Willow unsnapped her seatbelt, hitting the button to close the windows, and opened her door. “Because he didn’t have the men to do it. Welcome to our world, Shep. There’s a lot to clue you in about, and I’ll do that over the next week as we prepare to get you and your team out to those Delos charities to double their security. Because David’s shifted to terrorizing the Northern Ethiopian area.”

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Shaking his head, he opened his own door and muttered, “Then this terrorist is sniffing around the villages you fly into?”

Climbing out on her side, Willow said, “Yes. So far, he’s raided some of the villages, but not kidnapped any of the children in the Delos charities, not yet anyway. He goes in disguise, through the villages at large, to find kids. But he’s always around and we know that someday, he’s going to start going after the Delos children in the charities themselves. It’s only a matter of time. He’s a lurking hyena waiting for an opportunity to attack and capture his victims.” She moved to the rear of the car, opening the hatchback for him. She could see how upset he was, but nobody else could have. Shep always cloaked his emotions. Willow agreed one couldn’t turn into a sniveling, emotional basket case, but just sharing how he felt would have been enough for her. She saw the tightness at the corners of his mouth, telling her he was damn well upset. Plus, when under emotional duress, he always narrowed those incredibly sea-blue eyes of his. Those were the only markers to tell her he was troubled.

Leaning in, Shep grabbed his two duffle bags, hefting them out of the SUV.

“Tell you what,” Willow said, closing the hatchback and locking it, “I’ll show you to your condo, first. But then? If you feel up to it? Come down to mine and I’ll make you breakfast. Then, you can go back to yours and sleep off the time zones. Sound like a plan?” She wondered why the hell she was offering him this. The look in his eyes, however, told her why. There were still solid, good feelings between them. They might have both suffered badly from the divorce, but it had not destroyed the slice of goodness that had always existed between them.

He smiled tiredly. “Now you’ve gone from being my Angel and ascended to sainthood. Thanks. I’d like a good, hearty breakfast.”

Her heart opened. She saw the exhaustion shadowing his eyes, but also, his gratitude over the kindness she’d just extended him. “Okay, then,” she said, turning. “Follow me.” Because if she hadn’t turned? Willow could feel tears encroaching at the backs of her eyes and she wanted to sob. Sob out the three years lost between them.

His Angel.

Tears burned in her eyes and Willow quickly forced them away. That had always been his endearment for her. If she hadn’t ignored it, she was afraid she’d say things that shouldn’t be said. Instead, she led him to the underground elevator, slid an ID card into the slot, hit the button, and the doors opened. When she stepped aside, she didn’t avoid his glance. Willow could feel him digging into her for a response, but she wasn’t going to give him one. Those days were past. He’d had his chance. He wasn’t getting another one. Once he’d stepped in, she pushed the button for his floor, and the doors slowly cranked closed. It was humid and stuffy in the elevator as it slowly rose, protesting with strained sounds.

“It’s old,” she said.

He shrugged, the duffle bags at his feet. “Yeah, well, we’ll all get there someday.”

The door opened and Willow stepped out, saying, “Follow me.”

She had a key to Shep’s condo and halfway down the highly waxed wooden hall, she stopped and unlocked it, pushing the door open. Stepping aside, she said, “This is a condo building used by many Americans. It’s nicely furnished, and you’ll feel like you’re in a hotel.” She gestured for him to go on in.

Shep looked around his digs. It was a two-bedroom condo, and he hefted his bags onto one of the king-sized beds. He heard Willow in the kitchen and ambled down the light-green-tiled hall. The kitchen and living room were open-concept and were filled with hotel-like furniture, for sure. She was in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of water. She drank and turned and said, “This condo is fully furnished. You won’t want for anything. When I found out it was you coming, I took the risk of getting you some food I thought you’d like in here,” and she gestured toward the large American-sized refrigerator.

He halted near the granite counter that had white quartz with black fissures through it, arms across his chest. “Still risk-taking?” he teased.

Giving him a sour look, she set the glass on the counter. “Is there any other way to live, Porter? Come on, let’s head down the exit stairs to the fourth floor. My condo is literally beneath yours.”

The smile he gave her, the sudden heat in his eyes, caught her off guard as she opened the door and stepped into the empty hall. Yeah, he was still interested in her, dammit. Why? It had been three friggin’ years! Hadn’t he moved on? Willow almost stepped up to boldly ask him who the new woman in his life was. She assumed he had one.

She didn’t end up doing so but, if the ‘new and improved’ Porter was sincere about being a better communicator with her, she’d find out pretty quickly anyway. Any time she’d tried to look into his family or past? He’d locked her out. Walking to the heavy metal exit door, she placed her magnetic strip card against a panel nearby and opened it.

Holding up the card, she said, “Part of security procedures here. No one can get in or out of this building by the exit stairs unless they have a card. I have yours down in my condo and I’ll give both it and the elevator card to you. With this setup, if

terrorists try to enter one of these buildings via the exit door. They won't get in."

"Good to know," he said, holding the door open wider for her. She gave him that bored look of hers. "I haven't changed that much," he informed her.

"Yeah," she grumped, throwing him a dark look over her shoulder as she started down the stairs, "you haven't."

Shep tried to keep his face neutral as he entered Willow's large, roomy condo. It was entirely different from his hotel-looking one. She had huge jungle plants in all four corners of the living room. There were comfy light-blue chairs, a long couch, a recliner and a rocking chair. The floor was covered with a large rug patterned with pink blooming lilies floating on a quiet pond. On each of the three cream-colored walls were watercolor paintings. He wondered if they were from her brother, Ben. Even though her older brother had been a handful growing up, he'd always had extreme artistic talent. The family had tried to guide him into art school, but he'd wanted excitement, danger and risk. Just like Willow, Shep supposed, but Ben was testosterone on legs, doing crazy things that could get him killed someday. He'd had a lot of luck, but even then, luck could run out.

Halting in front of one of the paintings, the one depicting the Grand Canyon from the South Rim, he asked, "Did Ben paint this?"

Willow halted next to him. "Yes. All these paintings are by him."

"You know when you showed me his work on your cell phone back at Bagram?"

"Yes?"

"I thought he was an incredibly talented artist. Does he do art anymore?"

“I haven’t seen Ben in two years,” she admitted, frowning. “I rarely hear from him. He’s a black ops soldier. He’s always in battles. I just wait, I guess, like my family does, to be told he’s died in the field.”

Shep knew how close the two siblings were and, without thinking, he reached out, resting his hand lightly on her slumped shoulder. “I’m sorry, Willow...” and he held her startled gaze. Realizing what he’d done, he swiftly pulled his hand away. Shep stepped back to put enough distance between them so he couldn’t accidentally touch her again on impulse. He saw agony in her eyes for a moment and then, just as swiftly, that emotion was gone. Willow had been in the military, like him. They knew what a game face was and they knew how to wear one and wear it well. And she had one on right now. Lamenting the shift between them, Shep knew he had no one to blame but himself. Being around Willow was like being around gasoline, and he was the match.

“Do you have any way to stay in touch with Ben?”

Shaking her head, she said, “No, but I wish I did. Come on, I’m making us some breakfast. I’m starving.”

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The faint feeling of her longing for her older brother was nothing new to Shep. She loved Ben fiercely. As he followed her across the beautiful rug that looked hand-woven, he wondered once again if the death of her younger sister, Ella, at age twelve from childhood leukemia, was part of the reason. She had come from a loving home, unlike his own. There was no way for him to know how the loss of a child affected a family, but he knew it would never be good. The hall opened into a large kitchen and dining room. It looked to Shep like a chef's dream come true, with a gleaming steel Wolf stove sitting centerpiece. The windows were large, allowing a flood of morning light to pour in.

Willow went to the counter. "You still like strong, black coffee?" she asked, looking toward him as he stood unsurely in the middle of the cream-tiled room.

"Some things don't change, yes, strong and black. Please."

A sweetness riffled through her as she pulled out some K-cups from the drawer. "You're right, some things don't. I discovered this delicious, strong Ethiopian coffee and it's to die for. I think you'll like it."

Shep wandered to a maple buffet at one end of the dining room, watching her work with that grace of hers. "Sounds good." He halted momentarily as he saw a group of family photos in frames along it. One of them was of him. His brows rose and he couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was a photo of him in a red hardhat and his blue chambray shirt and Navy dungarees, looking off to the right, something catching his attention. He remembered that day. He'd taken Willow out to a nearby Afghan village where he and his digging crew were putting in a new well in for the people there. Willow had never been without her Canon camera, and he remembered her

snapping that shot.

Shep wanted to say something about his own photo mixed in with her family ones but didn't dare. If Willow had really moved on, and he'd assumed she had, why was his photo there? Why wasn't there a photo of the latest man in her life, instead? He found it impossible to believe she didn't have a man in her life. She was young, intelligent and incredibly confident. Turning, he saw her fiddling with her iPod and then soft classical music claimed the background of the huge roomy space. He recognized the piano music as Luovico Einaudi, one of her favorites. He listened to the opening bars as he took in the lovely plants hanging from the ceiling; lush leaves shining and bursting with life. Some had small, lavender flowers showing among their greenness.

"Take a seat at the kitchen table," she said, bustling to and fro, gathering everything she would need to make breakfast for them.

"Thanks. Nice place. It's alive," he said, sitting down at the small, round, white wrought-iron table with its glass top. Everywhere he looked, the place was neat and clean. It was part of Willow's discipline, he supposed. But he was a neatnik, too. Another place where they agreed to agree and not disagree. It was burning him up inside to not ask her about why she still had a photo of him. He watched her work; that quick efficiency of hers.

"I like living plants in my home," she said. "I hate sterile environments."

"Did your parents have a lot of plants in their house where you grew up?" Shep realized he'd never talked about such things with Willow, and he'd made it his mission to correct that flaw this time around; to show her he did care about her and her family, and not just himself. She seemed rather stunned for a split second, giving him a quick look as she arranged the eggs on the counter.

"My mother, you know: 'Ruth', is a nutritionist. She was always growing her own

herbs in small pots along the windowsills of our house in whatever Air Force base we were currently at.”

“Your Dad is probably retired from being a pilot in the Air Force by now though, right?”

“Yes. They’re living outside of Pacific Beach, California, near where I was born. They have a small ranch. Mom has a huge organic garden, plus my dad ordered a Sun Glo greenhouse package for her. He built it from the great kit they got, and now she’s got vegetables and herbs year ’round.”

“Sounds nice,” he said, leaning back, one leg hooked over the other at the ankles.

Willow brought over his coffee, sitting it before him. “Drink up.”

He looked up into her eyes, seeing a mix of emotions. She felt vulnerable to him and it automatically made Shep protective of Willow. Scoffing to himself internally as he lifted the dark, fragrant coffee to his lips, he knew she hated it whenever he became protective of her. She’d always called it ‘smothering’ and ‘suffocating’ and said that she was fully able to take care of herself. That had always been an area of contention between them, brutally heightened to the nth degree as they’d played out the farce that had been their marriage in the Afghan war zone. He thought ‘farce’ often when it came to their marriage but didn’t completely believe the word. Shep had often wondered if they’d been stateside, or in some other safer environment, if maybe the stress would have been less and if their marriage could have survived. He would never know the answer, but his mind asked the question over and over regardless.

Willow cracked six eggs into a bright-pink ceramic bowl, whisked them, and added salt, pepper, a few herbs and some milk. “Tell me more of your adventures over the last three years?” she asked him.

“Just like what you already know: kicking around the world, drilling wells, constructing buildings and stuff like that. Mostly in South America. Peru, to be exact.”

She smiled a little, pouring the eggy mixture into a black skillet on the stove. “I imagine you got to brush up on your Spanish?”

Shep had four foreign languages under his belt, Spanish one of them. “Yeah, it came in real handy.”

“So, the Marine Corps has continued using you and your team undercover via Delos I see.”

“They try to put me where no one’s going to notice I’m a Marine in disguise,” he said. “We were up in the Highlands of Peru, near Cusco. There’s a lot of activity with Russian drug teams coming in and trying to take over the cocaine trade up there. We were able to help locate them, and then the Army Special Forces killer teams went in and took them out. We were digging wells for those villages, so the Q’ero people always told us the truth of what was going on. They’d send messages discreetly to us. Messages we could pass on to one of those hunter-killer teams to take the bastards out. The Q’ero people hate the Russians. And that’s why I’ve spent the last three years down there.”

“Commendable work,” she murmured. “But dangerous.”

Shrugging, he said, “Someone has to do it. I like being undercover.” and he rubbed his beard. “I don’t have to shave every day,” and he grinned a little.

“Yeah, shaving every day wouldn’t be much to look forward to,” Willow agreed. “You look the same from when we were together at Bagram. All the black ops members there went unshaven, right? It helped them fit in with the Afghan guys with

their shaggy beards.”

“It was a good disguise,” he agreed. Shep had been through the Naval Monterey Language School to acquire Pashto, one of the languages of Afghanistan. He’d already learned Spanish, French and Italian.

“Ever been in Ethiopia before?” Willow asked.

“Nope, and I don’t know the language either.”

“You have a linguistic mind, so you’ll pick up some of it, I’m sure.”

He smiled, appreciating the coffee. “I dunno. If you say so.” He saw Willow shake her head and groan as she worked efficiently at the stove. “I know,” he drawled, “I wander the world clueless sometimes as far as you’re concerned.”

“I didn’t say that.”

He laughed a little. “No, you get brownie points for that, Willow.”

She laughed with him and quickly put the eggs on the two awaiting pink ceramic plates. The toast popped up and she had all four slices buttered and ready in no time. Turning, plates in hand, she said, “I know we can’t just ignore our past as we work together. It’s going to come up. But I’m not here to put salt in our wounds, Shep.” She set the plates down, turning and going to a drawer to retrieve the flatware.

He sat up, inhaling the fragrance of the scrambled eggs, and the sprinkled chunks of goat cheese and fragrant, mouth-watering herbs she’d mixed into them. “I was thinking along the same lines. I don’t want to fight with you, Willow. We have a job we’re going to be working together on and I want peace between us.”

She gave him the flatware and sat down opposite him, coffee beside her plate. “Chow down.”

Shep was starving and he ate quickly, as did Willow herself. In the military, there was very little time for a nice, luxurious meal. Everything was gobbled down within five minutes flat. And, through force of habit, this time was no exception. He wasn’t distracted quite enough by the amazing food to disregard the peaceful aura Willow always brought along with her, or the look he loved on her face when she was enjoying herself. Her fingers were long, and he watched them curl around her large mug of coffee from time to time as she consumed the breakfast fare. Those fingers had caressed him, loved him and, the fool he was, he’d driven her away. Sadness settled in his chest, and he fought against it. The past was done. He had nothing to

build on but the here and now.

“It was good, thanks. You’re one helluva cook. You always were.” he said, once done eating.

Her lips quirked. “I love cooking. With our flight schedules to the villages we take care of around the region, I don’t get much downtime.” She looked around her quiet, green-plant nook. “With this new assignment? Dev and I will be flying our asses off 24/7/365. About the only thing I’ll have time to do is stagger in here, hit my rack, sleep the sleep of the dead, get up at 0500 the next morning and fly all day long all over again.”

“Yeah, it’s a big project,” he agreed, munching on his dark-brown toast slathered with butter. “We need to sit down, but not right now, maybe later, to see the schedule you’ve worked out to get the supplies from the warehouse here in this city flown out to those villages.”

Nodding, Willow sipped her coffee, relaxing against the wrought iron chair. “Among many other things.”

“Are you up to dealing with me?” he asked, holding her lidded stare.

“I told Wyatt Lockwood I was.”

His brow lifted. She wasn’t directly answering his question, avoiding it instead. “I want to make this work between us, Willow. No one in these teams, except for Luke, because he’s Shield Security for this gig, knows we were married before.”

“Yeah, I got that.” She gave him a thoughtful look. “You’ve changed a little from what I can tell so far.”

“Naw, never gonna happen. Remember? I’m the stick-in-the-mud. The guy who was stubborn as ten mules put together. All head and no heart.” He saw a grin edge her full lips. But Willow was off limits. He’d had his chance and had blown it. But he couldn’t control his physical response to her. Three years apart had made her even more attractive to him than before.

“I remember,” she said, pushing her empty plate to one side. “I always liked when you sent me a photo of wherever you were at in your emails.”

“Oh... those. I know how much you love photography, Willow. And I didn’t want to lose touch with you completely.”

“You usually sent me pictures of children, dogs or random people out in fields.” she said.

Shep replied, “Kids and animals were always important to you. I saw that when we went into Afghan villages with medical teams to help them. I liked the photos you sent me as well.”

She nodded, sipping her coffee. “I thought you might like to see where I was working and flying.”

“I did. I’ve never been in Africa, and I found your photos always interesting. I wished,” he admitted, “there had been more.”

“Mmmm.”

Shep saw sadness in her expression for a moment. He was feeling sad, too. “Look,” he began heavily, opening his large hands, holding her gaze, “I need to apologize to you. It’s been a long time coming, but I’ve had three years to reflect on my being a total jerk toward you.” He pushed on, feeling his stomach clench because Willow

gave him a shocked look, as if never expecting him to own up to what he'd done to her and their marriage.

"I know there's a lot wrong with me. At the time we married, I didn't see it, but you did." His mouth flattened, his voice growing hoarse. "I loved you, but I drove you off, Willow. And... looking back on it? I screwed up totally. You had every right to walk out on me and demand a divorce. I'm sorrier than you'll ever know. And I don't expect any forgiveness. I just want the slate between us clear so we can work together on this undercover assignment honestly. I don't want barbs of anger from myself to you. All I want at this stage is the hope that we can be the friends we once were before we took that premature leap of faith into marriage. What do you think?" and he studied her stunned expression, her eyes filling with tears. She swallowed hard several times.

"I-I guess I never expected this," she admitted, her voice hollow. Leaning her elbows on the table, wrapping her hands around the mug in front of her, she added, "I accept your apology. I wasn't exactly spotless in our marriage, either." She sighed. "And we married in a war zone, Shep. And we divorced in it, too. I was a combat pilot. The adrenaline highs and lows I went through during and after missions, didn't help matters, either." She gave him a sorrowful look. "I've had the same three years you had to look back and see what I contributed to our divorce, also."

"There were a lot of pressures on us," he agreed quietly, holding her somber gaze. "But I was the main reason you walked out. And I deserved it. I'm not asking for pity here. What I hope, after these three years, is that I'm a changed person. At least, I'm trying."

Willow sat back, staring at him. "Are you presently in a relationship, Shep?"

He gave her a wry look. "Me? You were married to me. What other woman would put up with a patriarchal, neanderthal hulk like me?"

“It wasn’t that bad,” she admitted.

He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “At least, I guess you could say that over the last three years I tried to do something you accused me of being incapable of.”

“What was that?”

“Trying to teach myself how to become self-aware enough to be thoughtful and caring toward other people. Trying to plumb my own depths, my thoughts... those pesky emotions I avoided like the plague,” and he managed a poor semblance of a smile. “You were right: I was completely self-centered.”

“I used the word ‘narcissist’.”

“Yeah, that one, too. Anyway, I’ve been working on myself, looking at why I am the way I am. And what happened to tip me that direction.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said softly.

“You’ve always been self-aware, haven’t you?”

“My mom supported me when I was just a kid, Shep. She said I had to be responsible and think about what I was going to say to someone before even opening my mouth. That, if I ever did something unhealthy, I had to look inside myself and figure out where that action had originated from. To understand what event, experience, what person or environment, pushed me in that direction. And if it hurt someone else? Any human, or animal or the Earth itself? Then I had to fix that broken bit within myself and never do it again. So yes, I’m constantly aware of myself. It doesn’t mean I’m perfect. It just means I’m trying to be a better person where I wasn’t before, is all. Probably most important? Is not projecting on other people.”

“Yeah, I remember this talk with you many times.”

She responded with a nod. “We’re getting into some deep psychology here, but people are constantly projecting on one another. And it’s a terrible place to be in because the other person is always savaged and hurt by our accusations about stuff that we, ourselves have within us, but we’re blaming the other person and then playing the victim. Yup, it’s a terrible place to be in, Shep. And that was a huge part of our marriage going south.”

He responded, “I have a tough time seeing myself, so I don’t really feel any changes. I hope you will see them in me, though.”

She snorted. “I’ll get off my tirade about patriarchal males who are toxic masculinity at its finest. Just the fact that you asked me PERSONAL questions about my family shows you’ve changed. You never once asked me about my family before.”

Wincing, he said, “Yeah, I was pretty much asleep.”

“At least now you’re trying. That’s good, Shep.”

“I needed you to know this, Willow, because we’re going to be working closely together over the next year and I didn’t want World War Three to erupt between us like it did in our marriage.”

“I told Wyatt I’d be professional, and I will be, Shep. You don’t have to worry about me nagging you. I know we can work on that level with one another without any problem.”

He gave her a warm look, wanting to reach out and curl his fingers around hers. “We’ll make this work,” he promised her, wild feelings of relief flowing through him. Willow had grown, too, he realized. She’d once had a hair-trigger temper when things didn’t go her way. Now? She was thoughtful. Not so quick to judge or throw up defenses against him if he started withdrawing from her emotionally. Sure, all looked

good enough for now, but Shep still had no confidence in the strength of the hull of their rebuilt relationship; the same ship they'd already wrecked on so many angry reefs while trying to man the helm together in the past. How could they expect to keep the vessel on course this time around?

CHAPTER 5

Willow couldn't believe Shep had apologized to her. After he left to go sleep off his jet lag in his condo, she puttered around her own kitchen, cleaning up and putting the dirty plates into the dishwasher. It was nearly noon when a knock came at her door.

Opening, it, she saw it was Dev. Stepping aside, she asked, "Everyone tucked into bed?"

Grinning, Dev walked in. "Yes, everyone is settled in, fed and have had a shower and I'm sure most of them are sleeping like babies. I showed Luke to the condo he and Porter are sharing. So, everything's done."

"Great, thanks for that. Have you eaten, Dev?"

"No. But I can go to my condo and scrounge up a sandwich."

"Don't worry, come on in," and Willow shut the door behind her business partner. "I was just making a fresh cup of coffee. Want some? How about a sandwich? I got some tuna left over and it'll be quick to fix."

"Sounds good, thanks," Dev said, walking into the kitchen with her. "How'd things go with your ex?"

Willow saw amusement dancing in Dev's dark-blue eyes as she leaned against the counter next to the coffee machine. "Better than expected."

“Tell all.”

Dev was like a sister to her. Willow plopped a K-cup into the Keurig. “Shep apologized for being a jerk while we were married.” Going to the fridge, she pulled out a bowl of tuna and quickly made a sandwich for Dev.

Making a humming sound of satisfaction, Dev said, “Were you expecting that?”

“Hell, no. We had a great friendship, and we should never have gotten married, but it was a mad, crazy, spontaneous moment when we did it.”

“Sometimes? Friendship is the best base for a good, strong, lasting relationship,” Dev said. And then she laughed abruptly. “Of course, who am I to say such things? I trust men as far as I can throw them.”

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Willow nodded. It had been Dev's uncle, her father's brother, who had molested her as a child. She'd never breathed a word of what he'd done to her to her parents, afraid they wouldn't believe her. But the damage to Dev's psyche, emotions and self-worth, had been devastating. Dev saw all men through the same fractured, dark lens, thanks to that sick bastard. "Well, you're twenty-nine and you've been around to see the world. You have every right to your observations."

"You and Shep were good for one another."

"Yes, in bed," Willow admitted, leaning against the counter, waiting for the cup to fill. "Looking back on it? I think the stress, the danger, never knowing if you'd live one minute or die the next? That was one major cause of our divorce. We were too stressed to think straight or clearly when we'd get into a fight with one another." She set to work on the sandwich and, in a few minutes, handed it to Dev on a plate.

"Never mind. Shep could never open up to you emotionally," Dev said dryly, turning, taking the cup from the Keurig. "You want this one?"

"Yes, please."

Dev handed her the freshly made cup of coffee and put in a second K-cup, sliding the mug beneath the machine. "Has he opened up to you at all? Or is he still the same immature surfer dude as before?" She took the tuna sandwich and began munching on it as she waited for the coffee.

"It's too soon to tell," Willow admitted, blowing across the steaming coffee, and crossing the dining room to the table, sitting down. After a moment, Dev, her own

coffee in hand, took a seat opposite Willow, who went on, “He seems to really want to make amends. And to tell you the truth? I’d rather have him trying to smooth things out between us than be all closed up like he was before. He actually asked about me and my parents and family. I almost fainted, Dev. He’d NEVER asked me personal questions like that before.”

Chuckling, Dev drawled in her best Southern voice, “Looks like he had a ‘come to Jesus’ moment?”

Laughing softly, Willow said, “I don’t know. Maybe he’ll share it with me someday.”

“I saw the way he scanned you over at the airport.”

“Oh?” and she gazed in Dev’s direction, seeing that cat-like satisfaction on her face. “What look was that?”

“Well, if I may be permitted to surmise, I’d say the dude is still in love with you.”

Snorting, Willow muttered, “Gimme a break, Mitchell! There’s no way in hell!”

“Okay,” Dev said, giving her a shrug. “You asked. I’m just telling you what I saw.”

“You’re reading his face wrong,” Willow muttered defensively.

Dev gestured toward the buffet. “Okay, then tell me this: Why do you have Shep’s photo among your family’s photos, Willow? Ever since we hooked up as pilots here in Ethiopia, those photos have been out for everyone to see.”

Grumpily, while Dev grinned, Willow sipped her coffee and said, “Sometimes, Mitchell, you’re too friggin’ smart for your own good.”

“Maybe. Observation has always been a strong point of mine. The first time I came to your condo here, I saw the family photos and HIM. Remember? I asked you who he was?”

“Busted.”

“I won’t hold it against you, girlfriend.” Dev’s grin widened as she finished off the tuna sandwich. “So? Tell all. What happened when you brought him here?”

Flattening her lips, Willow stared over at Dev. “We were always good friends. Always. And it was as if three years hadn’t gone by at all; it felt like only a day had passed since last seeing him. We fell into our usual friendly back-and-forth with each another. It blew my mind. I walked out on him and I was the one who demanded the divorce, but it’s as if it never happened. Really crazy shit. I’m still confused about what’s going on here.”

“But?”

Grimacing, Willow looked up at the white stucco ceiling above her. “Shep is not a bad person, Dev. He never was. But dammit, he was closed-up emotionally. And I could never figure out WHY. And he would never talk about his past, his parents or what his growing-up years were like.”

“Yeah,” Dev intoned sourly, “we were all brainwashed, mangled and branded in that first eighteen years of our lives, weren’t we?”

Willow knew Dev’s childhood had been a hot mess. Her father was an F-16 jet pilot. They’d moved pretty much every two to three years to a new base somewhere in the world. Dev’s mother, Jennifer, was also an Air Force pilot and flew C-130s. Dev had taken strongly after her mother, and she too had flown the same C-130s for the nearly ten years she’d been in the military. “Yes, no argument from me.”

“If I didn’t have trust in you, Willow, I’d never have opened up to what happened to me as a very young child. And I feel strongly that Shep probably had a crappy childhood. And he’s not wanting to share it because he probably feels humiliated and shamed by it. Tell me? What kid in a rotten family wants to own up to it and brag about it? Nada.”

Willow said, “Then? Does it come down to a matter of trust? Is that why Shep never let me in? Never let me share what he felt emotionally within him?”

“I think it might be that, in part,” Dev said, hesitating. “I’ve found so many people are lousy parents, and that the child is deeply wounded and scarred before they even leave the nest and make their way out into the world, off-balance, and trying their best to look normal when they weren’t. They lived in a private hell.”

“‘Normal’ is a knob on a dryer and that’s it,” Willow muttered. “I always thought Shep did trust me, but maybe you’re right.” It hurt to think that because she had trusted him with her life. She loved him. She couldn’t see how anyone who was truly in love wouldn’t trust their partner a hundred percent.

Dev saw her frown. “Maybe he trusted you in some ways, but not in others? It sounded like you two really loved one another.”

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“He was the first guy to make me think about having a serious relationship, Dev.”

“Well,” she said, “maybe that love still exists between you, even after three years have passed?”

“I don’t know,” Willow admitted tiredly, shaking her head.

“One thing’s for sure,” Dev said, “you are going to find out. This assignment is going to be a year long. It will be a shakedown cruise of another kind for you two birds.”

Willow admitted she was right. “I’m sure I’ll be a lot clearer about him and myself by that time.” With a loud sigh, she added, frowning, “We got terrorists lurking around here and that has my FULL attention. Everything else is second or third.”

Tefere David sat with his lieutenants in a warehouse far outside Bahir Dar. The morning was cool and they all sat around smoking American cigarettes, the white plumes rising lazily into the vast air of the semi-darkened, packed warehouse. Although just at the age of forty, Tefere appeared much older, with horizontal lines across his broad forehead and deep slashes on either side of his full mouth that was now puckered. He sat with three of his most trusted men at a makeshift table, a map of the Northern Province of Ethiopia spread out before them on its rough plywood surface.

“Our spy at the airport, who is a baggage handler for one of the foreign airlines,” he told his men, all in their twenties and thirties, all dressed in the garb normal to

Ethiopians, “tells me a Delos transport landed with forty employees on board earlier today.” He sucked on his cigarette, inhaling the smoke deep into his lean body. “This is part of some kind of build-up within this charity. Forty is a lot of people. They all looked like Americans.”

Zere, thirty-five years old, his second-in-command, said, “Some Latinos and Blacks were among them. Perhaps they aren’t all from the USA.”

Shrugging, Tefere said, “Doesn’t matter, although American women bring us more money on the market.”

Zere lifted his chin, staring over at his leader. “There are no children among this group, my lord.”

Tefere snapped back, “I have talked to Rasari and he’s shown interest in American women in their twenties. He is paying well for them.”

“Why that old?” Zere demanded, scowling. “Men want children for sex, not women in their twenties.”

“Look at it from Rasari’s trading instincts. American women are hated the world over by all terrorist factions. If they can buy one from him? It saves them the trouble of trying to find one in the Middle East to capture, put on video, and then behead them for all the world to see.”

“Hmmm,” Zere murmured, “that’s brilliant.”

“Yes, there’s no question he’s a genius,” and Tefere grinned. “He doesn’t really want them for sex trafficking as much as he does for building a market to get American women captives in who are wanted for other reasons. He already has one buyer in Pakistan who is willing to pay five million dollars for one.”

A murmur went through the lieutenants huddled crowded around the makeshift table. The air was filled with whitish dust from the bales of cotton stacked nearly up to the top of the two-story aluminum building. Tefere was always changing his meeting spots, staying one step ahead of the Ethiopian Army who hunted him and his crews. Even though they dressed like tribal Ethiopians, and appeared as such to the outside world, underneath they were the most dangerous of men. In order to not give the game away, they had their caches of AK-47s, and ammunition stored elsewhere. They were never safe, and for that reason, Tefere rarely came to Bahir Dar. But his one lieutenant, Assefa, who kept his ear to the ground in the Lake Tana region, of which the city sat at the southern end of, had heard gossip at the airport. And it had been enough to bring him in.

Tefere stubbed out his cigarette on the plyboard tabletop. “My spy says that there are two American women who pilot the Delos plane.” He pulled out two photos from within the dark-green vest he wore over his white shirt, placing both on the table. Everyone craned their necks, studying them in the low light. “The one with the red hair is the one I want. The other woman, the one with brown hair, would be my second choice.”

“What do you know of them?” Assefa asked.

“Not much. Not yet. My spy is going to try and find out their names over at Operations at the control tower. They must have flight plans and their names will be on them. He has to be careful. He knows an Ethiopian woman who works at the weather desk. He feels she is someone who can be bribed to give him more information.”

“Who cares what their names are?” Teka, the youngest of the group at age twenty-five, spoke up.

Tefere gave him an impatient look. “With a name, we can go on the Internet and find

out a great deal more. Before I try to capture this red-haired woman, I want to know who she is. I then need to call Rasari and tell him the information. He has a buyer, but the buyer has demands. If this woman doesn't fulfill those demands, I'm not going to waste my time trying to capture her."

Teka nodded. "That makes sense."

The next day, Willow and Dev had the entire group meet at the hotel's largest banquet hall. They had spent a month putting together a Power-Point on the first village they were going to be upgrading for security. At nine a.m., the crowded room was quiet as Willow went into her presentation projected onto the huge screen at the front end of the room. The supervisors were taking notes while many of the workmen watched on as well. Everyone on the security team, she saw, were also making notes.

"Addis Zemen is the closest village flight-wise," she told them, flashing a picture on the screen of the many homes with tin roofs and stucco block scattered across the valley, ringed behind by high mountains. "It sits east of Lake Tana, up in the hills where it's cooler, at 6,480 feet in elevation. Addis Zemen has a population of twenty-four thousand people. They are of the Amhara tribe, as are the people of all the villages you'll be working in. It's an agricultural area and the people are farmers. They have herds of cattle and goats. Herds that can forage year-round, due to grass being available during every season. A lot of vegetables are raised there, and sold in other cities, notably the capital, Addis Ababa."

She flashed a picture of a one-story brick building with rows of windows along it up on the screen. "Addis has a Delos Home School. It's a big enough town to have teachers brought in to educate the children. There are many smaller villages surrounding Addis Zemen, and the children are brought in from them every day for nine months out of the year by pickup trucks. There are no school busses, just parents

who are pitching in to help. Delos gives the men who drive the children to and from other villages a stipend for gas, as well as paying them for their time, so it works out well for all.”

Flashing up another picture, she said, “This is the Farm Foundation office. We have ten people there working with the farmers to improve agricultural methods; teaching breeding techniques and ways of better domesticating animals, mostly oxen, cows and goats. This group has created a network between grocers in the capital, as well as arranging truckloads of vegetables to it. They have four diesel trucks that make runs to Addis Ababa whenever the veggies are in season.”

She turned to Shep, sitting next to her, and asked him, “Do you want to show everyone the plans for the security upgrades on both these areas?”

Nodding, he took over the talk as Willow sat back down. He flashed a new photo up. It was of the heavy chain-link and poles they called cyclone fencing. He then clicked to a blueprint of the school showing where the ten-foot-high fence, with razor wire spooled out along its top, would be built. Citing some theft from the school, as well as from the Farm Foundation, Shep covered all the security that would need to be built into those areas. He talked at some length about the soil and the underlying lava rock of the region, and about the machines they’d need on hand to break through below to properly install the secure fence posts. Once he was done, he said, “Let’s break and go out into the hall where they’ll have coffee and tea ready for us.”

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He turned, meeting Willow's gaze. Feeling the easy connection between them, he wanted to drown in her green eyes, but resisted. Handing her the remote, he said, "Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"I'll go with you," she said, rising. She turned to Dev. "Might as well stretch?"

"For sure."

Willow saw Luke walking toward them. The two women parted ways as the security officer went over to talk to Dev. Finding the scene interesting, Willow glanced back toward Luke and her friend. Usually, Dev was wary and cool toward strange men, and Luke fit that description. He'd been here barely a day. True, Dev had worked closely with him to get the employees to the nearby hotels after they'd landed, but that had just been business as always, hadn't it? She saw a pinkness come to Dev's cheeks as Luke smiled and spoke to her. Willow was too far away, heading for the door, to hear what was said.

"What's the funny look on your face?" Shep asked, placing one hand beneath her elbow to guide her around the clumps of people talking over their coffee and snacks.

"Oh," she said, "I just found it interesting that Dev wasn't giving Luke the cold shoulder."

Halting at one coffee urn, Shep dropped his hand from her elbow, took a cup, and poured her coffee, handing it to her. "Is Dev already in a relationship?"

Stepping aside, Willow leaned against the wall so that others could get their drink of

choice. Shep joined her, about a foot separating them. Today, he was dressed in ivory-khaki pants and a dark-blue short-sleeved shirt. He'd recently trimmed his beard a bit, his longish brown-and-gold hair gleaming with highlights from the overhead chandelier hanging in the middle of the hall. "She doesn't like men. Well," she quickly amended, "that came out wrong. She had a really horrible childhood and was abused by a male relative in her family when very young. Since then, she'll work with men, but she's never had a relationship with one that I could find out about."

Frowning, he murmured, "That's too bad. Must have been really awful for her growing up?"

"Yeah, it was." Willow didn't want to go there. Shep might have to know some things about Dev, but he didn't need her life story. "She seemed to perk up when Luke wandered over to her, that's all."

He sipped his coffee, watching his people mingle with the security team. Luke came over, poured two cups of coffee, then crossed back to the briefing room on the tail of Dev, who was also headed back in. "Well," Shep drawled, giving Willow a slanted glance, "that seems hopeful."

Her mouth quirked. "I can't believe it. That would be a first. She gives every other guy the cold shoulder and tells them to pretty much fuck off."

"Glad you haven't said that to me," and he meant it, holding her upturned gaze. Willow was so close that he inhaled the feminine scent that was only her. Shep had never realized the power of smell until he'd fallen in love with this willful woman. It wasn't that she wore a perfume, and it wasn't the soap she used. He would never forget the fragrance of her flesh. He saw Willow stare at him, wishing he could read her mind.

"We have to work together. Besides? You apologized to me. That meant a lot to me,

Shep,” and she boldly held his stare.

“Maybe we needed time to grow up?” And then he quickly amended it with a sloppy grin, “Well, I needed that time far more than you did.”

“More like it,” she snorted, sipping her coffee, hiding her smile. Warmth flowed through her because she saw that softening in Shep’s eyes and she knew that look. Willow wasn’t going to say it was love. But maybe an offer of friendship? That would be nice. After all, it was the foundation they’d started out on in the first place.

Chuckling, he finished the coffee off and took the empty cup over to the white-linen-covered table. He returned to her, planting his hands on his hips. People began to return to the room for the second part of the project briefing. Once Willow was finished with her own coffee, he took her cup from her hand, their fingers touching briefly. It sent his heart yearning as he turned away.

Willow tried to remain immune to Shep’s nearness. Wishing he wasn’t so sensual; she pushed away from the wall and didn’t wait for him. She felt him wanting to establish some kind of emotional connection with her, but she wasn’t ready for that. Yes, he’d apologized, but she needed time. And besides, they were going to be so insanely busy flying up to ten flights or more a day, bringing supplies in, that they wouldn’t have any together time even if she wanted it.

She was surprised to see Luke sitting with Dev. They seemed relaxed, talking quietly between themselves. He had his elbows on his long, hard thighs, his cup of coffee held between them. Luke was a handsome man, no question. A little worried, she saw the pink in Dev’s cheeks. Plus, she seemed riveted to his every word. That wasn’t like her at all. Okay? So, what was going on? Willow would find out when they were alone.

Luke saw her and straightened. “I’m taking up your seat,” he said, rising, giving her a

slight smile.

“No worries,” Willow assured him.

In another five minutes, everyone was squeezed into the air-conditioned room. Shep took the remote and Willow sat down, listening to his soothing voice. He had the kind of voice that had always calmed her whenever she'd come off a particularly tough mission. Before meeting Shep, it would take her hours to climb down off that adrenaline charge she rode when on a bombing run. His devastating smile, the warmth that lingered in his blue eyes, his low, husky voice all conspired to be a tranquilizer of sorts for her. She'd never experienced that with anyone else. Just Shep. Groaning internally, Willow gazed circumspectly around the room. The people selected by Delos cared. There wasn't a single one among their ranks who was not listening intently or taking notes. That made her feel good. She was sure, before this year was out, she'd know every one of them.

Luke Gibson then stood up, took the remote and proceeded to give them their security briefing.

“Our biggest worry is a Somali named Tefere David,” he told them, flashing the man's face up on the screen. “He's the wild card here in the country. The Ethiopian Army is working directly with us regarding him. He's a sex-trafficker and he's a mercenary with five hundred plus child soldiers. He was down in southern Sudan, in the Darfur region for many years. That's where he picked up these children and armed them with weapons.” Luke's voice went hard. “He and his soldiers, over the last year, have attacked every village that Delos has a charity in. We're not sure if it's aimed at the charities, or if this is just his normal M.O. The worst part is that he's kidnapped young girls and boys, between eight to fifteen, from each of these villages.”

Luke scowled, looking around at the people in the room. “The Ethiopian Army wants

this bastard. Delos and Shield Security are working 24/7/365 with the general of the Northern Province where we'll be located. If they spot Tefere, we receive an immediate call. Or, if we spot him, we call the general's HQ. Tefere's armed, he's dangerous and he's sneaky as hell. Often, he'll send one of his child soldiers, usually mid-teens, into a village, pretending to need help. A family will take the child in, feed and help him, and then he'll do his undercover work of locating the other young kids, which hut, which family. After about a month? He'll gather the intel and give it to Tefere, who will launch a raid, usually fifty armed men, and capture those targeted children. Tefere and his men are the type that fire first and don't bother asking questions later."

Luke leaned down to the mic, putting his serious scowl on for real, and continued, "Which is why you will always carry a sidearm on you. If you're not working, you're sleeping with it within hand's reach. You're all expert qualified. And most of you are in the military, undercover, which can only help if he ever does attack our position."

A hand rose.

"Yes, Charlie?"

"What's the SOP, Luke? We're in the construction business, and we're focused mainly on what we're supposed to be building."

Luke, naturally understanding 'SOP' as jargon for 'standard operating procedure', replied, "At this town, my people will have wheels. There are four white Toyota Hilux's on the road as we speak, headed out from Bahir Dar. They'll arrive at Addis Zemen around about 2300 tonight." He grinned a little, and continued, "That's eleven p.m. to the few civilian types among us."

A couple of laughs broke out.

Losing his smile, Luke said, “We’ll be having five people on and five off, twelve-hour days for our security team. We will be roving around the areas where the charities are located, as well as where all of you will be housed for the duration of this project.”

“Which is where?” Charlie asked. “I thought we were gettin’ tents.”

More laughter.

Willow touched Luke’s arm. He turned.

“Let me handle the logistics?”

“Gladly,” and he handed her the remote.

For the next hour, Willow went through all the daily things that were important for a group like this. There was an old barracks that had been kept up by the Ethiopian Army until five years ago. Then it had been turned into a cheap hotel. Dev and Willow had dealt with the owner and, over the last couple of months, upgrades, new mattresses, sheets, towels and other amenities of civilization, had flowed in. Delos had paid for all of them. The hotel owner was very happy because he would receive a monthly check from Delos for the forty people who would be sleeping there.

The barracks also had a large, working kitchen and Willow had hired six women to be there to cook three meals a day for the hard-working group. Some of the food

would be Ethiopian. Other meals, more American, like hamburgers with fries. There was a lot of head-nodding on that one, and Willow grinned. Charlie was the supervisor for one of the construction teams. He'd already asked George to be the logistics manager having anything to do with bed and food.

"Hey," Charlie called out, not bothering to raise his hand because he was now on a roll, "tell me Willow, is Delos gonna fly pizza in from time to time for us?" He grinned hugely.

Everyone was nodding like bobble head dolls.

Willow broke out in laughter and so did Shep, Dev and Luke.

"I dunno," she deadpanned. "If Delos doesn't come through, what will you do, Charlie?"

"Well," he blustered, good naturedly, lifting his brown cap with the Delos logo on the front, "I guess we're gonna have to teach those nice ladies how to make pizza dough and find the right ingredients and have 'em make 'em."

"Oh," Willow murmured, "I don't think you'll have to go that far." She held up a list from her folder. "George? Since you're the hotelier for this motley crew? Do you want to look in your file? There's a monthly menu there."

George, who was in his forties and lean as a rail, dug quickly around in his kit. He found the menu, rapidly read down it, then yelled, "Hot damn! Pizza once a week! Hamburgers once a week! Holy shit! We're gonna get STEAK once a week!" He looked up, grinning like a wolf. "This is better vittles than my wife, Linda, makes when I'm back home!"

The room burst into laughter, hoots, hollers and plenty of clapping. Willow had never

worked with Seebee construction or security crews before, but she liked their easy-going spirit. This was a group that, if they didn't have what they wanted, they'd scrounge it up from somewhere. She had a good feeling about the men and women in the crew, some of them in their mid-twenties. Charlie, who was fifty, was the oldest, and his red hair had streaks of silver in it, making him the boss for sure.

"Okay," Shep called over the tumult, "Charlie? Next time something goes south? I'm gonna go email Linda and tell her what you said."

"Oh," Charlie said, chuckling deeply, "you've never worked with me and my crew, Mr. Porter. You'll find out right quick we're the best at what we do. You aren't gonna have to email my wife and tattle on me."

Shep nodded, trying not to smile. "Well, I wouldn't do that anyway, but it was sure good for a laugh."

"Hey," Charlie said, holding up his hand as if he were standing up in front of a senate hearing, taking an oath on the Bible, "this is the best damned menu I've ever seen. Delos has fed us well before, but this one is the ace."

"Good," Willow called out, "because, even though it's winter here in Ethiopia, you are all going to be sweating out there while you work. By the time you get trucked back to the hotel, you'll be starving big time."

"That's okay," Charlie said, becoming serious. "We'll work hard, and we'll play hard."

CHAPTER 6

"What do you think of this mission so far?" Shep asked Willow.

“I think the move to Addis Zemen went well.” Willow set a casserole of wat, an Ethiopian staple, on the kitchen counter. It was a stew with chicken, mixed herbs and vegetables. Along with the ingredients for it, she had purchased injera, a spongy, flat bread made from a millet-like grain called teff, from a woman vendor in the market, after she’d flown back into Bahir Dar. The mix of spices she used in the dish was called ‘berbere’, and included chili peppers, garlic, ginger, basil and other more local herbs such as rue and fenugreek. The scents in her kitchen made Willow’s own stomach growl. She’d invited Shep down for an evening meal with her. Dev, herself and Shep had flown back into the airport around midday. She’d had time to throw the wat together in her Crockpot.

“I think we’ve got a very seasoned crew, almost as much as the way this food’s starting to smell,” he agreed, smiling. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

The setting sun’s rays slanted through the western window of her condo, illuminating the sheer, gauzy cream-colored drapes. She didn’t look too closely at why she’d invited Shep to eat with her. Maybe because he wasn’t very good at cooking, and would enjoy the stout Ethiopian meal? Maybe that was it? If she squinted? She brought over glasses of iced tea with thick wedges of lemon floating among the ice cubes. “No, just sit and relax. You still have major jet lag, just like everyone else.” She pulled white linen napkins from a cabinet and walked over to hand him one.

“Did you take pity on me?” Shep teased, spreading the napkin across his lap.

“What do you mean?” Willow asked, sitting down at his right elbow, ladling the fragrant stew out of the casserole and into a large soup bowl then handing it to him.

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“That I can’t cook worth a damn,” and he gave her a boyish grin, thanking her for the bowl. Their fingers met.

Willow didn’t want to enjoy the connection, but she did. “I know that. That’s why I invited you down here. Also, because you’re probably going to be eating a lot more Ethiopian food in Addis Zemen than American. There’s no McDonald’s in that town or any other village in the Northern Province.” She gestured to the wat and said, “I didn’t spice it as hot as the Ethiopians like it, but it’s still zesty, so be forewarned. Also, I’ll make up a container of it for Luke. I’m sure he’ll appreciate a home-cooked meal about now.”

“He will. Thank you. Hey, I like zesty,” and he gave her a knowing look that could easily be translated.

“Oh,” she said, filling her own bowl, “meaning you married me and it was a zesty two-year romp?”

Picking up the curled bread, he unfolded it and tore off a piece, dipping it into the stew. “Yes. You made my life interesting, overflowing with vitality and exploration, no question.”

Willow liked that they could talk about their marriage without either of them getting out of whack about it. She dug hungrily into her own stew. “We will always be opposites, Shep.”

“That’s what drew me to you.” He chewed on the bread, the honey-like flavor invading his nostrils. “You gotta admit, your red hair was a beacon in that bar.”

She smiled fondly, remembering that first meeting. “If it was such a beacon, then how’d you crash into me? And then you wouldn’t take no for an answer. You’re a Type-A hiding under a Type-B exterior, Porter.”

Gloating, he nodded. “True, I’m low-key on first meeting. Hey, this is really good,” he said, pointing to the steaming bowl.

“Wat is a country-wide stew that is served nearly every day in families here. Good thing you like it because you’ll eat a lot of it over the coming year.”

“You made this?”

“Yes. Will miracles never cease?” and she gave him a wolfish grin. Her heart hammered briefly when he sent back that yearning, heated look of his. Shep never could hide how he felt about her, and Willow was glad for that. The guy might be the world’s toughest safe to crack emotionally, but when it came to enjoyment, to wanting her sexually, it was always right there in his eyes. In his beautiful, sharpened azure eyes that missed nothing.

He said, “I think this is going to work out well between us. You gave a great talk at the briefing.”

“These people need to be brought up to speed about Ethiopia, its culture and people. And the people here... are wonderful. They’re hard-working, love their families, and all they want is to be able to work, till their fields, and survive.”

“Just like in every other country in this world. Right?” Shep replied.

She nodded between bites. Waving the injera bread around, she said, “Yes, but this country is far more stable than most other African countries, which is good.”

“So far,” he murmured, soaking his own bread in the fragrant, reddish-colored stew. “I worry about this Tefere David, though. He sounds like a really sick bastard. Turns my stomach to hear he’s stealing children to sell them to sex traffickers in Europe and who even knows where else. The parents have to be torn up completely.”

“They are,” she said grimly. “We fly into those villages monthly, sometimes more often. If there’s a medical emergency, we’ll fly in day or night, and take the child or adult to the hospital in Addis Ababa for treatment.”

“Do you ever get a vacation?” he wondered.

Laughing a little, Willow shook her head. “Not really. There’s just Dev and me for the upper one-third of Ethiopia where Delos has their charities. We kind of get thrown a bit of slack from time to time, for a week maybe, at most. And even when we do, we can’t leave the country and go home to visit our family. Well, I should amend that because Dev never wants to go home to be with her family anyway; it’s so dysfunctional.”

“What about you?”

She liked that he was now asking personal questions. And that they seemed sincere ones. That was a nice change in Shep that she’d desperately needed. “Oh, I’d love to visit my mom and dad.”

“How are they?”

“Retired. Enjoying life on their five-acre farm outside of Seattle, Washington. My Dad, ex-fighter jock that he is, is now working part time for Boeing in their drone department.”

“What about your mom, Ruth?”

She was amazed he'd remembered her name. Swallowing her surprise, she said, "My mother has her own nutrition business. That way she can stay home, weed her huge garden, canning in the late summer and into the fall, and then grow veggies during the winter in her greenhouse. She's happy."

"Are you happy, Willow?" Shep asked, holding her surprised stare.

Taken off guard, she blinked a few times before replying, "Yes, I am. I like being of service. I'd rather drop supplies; food, medicine and clothing, to villages, than drop bombs. There was a hidden part of me; while I loved the adrenaline charge of flying an F-16, I never liked killing. I knew the bombs had to be dropped, but I never gloried in it like other pilots did. People died. Bad people, for sure, but it's still killing, and I longed for a more peaceful world. At least for me personally, I found one here in Ethiopia... to a degree."

"I always knew you were a softy beneath that tough, brash jet jockey exterior you walked and talked." He saw her grimace.

"I think everyone has more than one side to themselves, don't you, Shep?" Just to be able to talk like this was refreshing to Willow. She'd never been able to entice him into this kind of philosophical discussion before. He seemed relaxed and almost eager to talk with her, which was also new. Her heart warmed. She saw he was honestly trying to invoke those changes he said he'd made.

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“Well,” he said, holding her gaze, “you’re right. I’ve had three years of kicking around in South America to look at our failed marriage. If nothing else? I wanted to learn from it because I never wanted to repeat it.”

“Because you want to get married again?” Willow had to ask.

“No, not necessarily. I’m a construction bum, Willow. My life is a tumbleweed. I go where the construction is at. You can’t drag a wife and kids around like that.”

Shrugging, Willow said, “My dad was in the Air Force for twenty years. All I knew growing up was a new base in a new country every two to three years. It didn’t harm me. I think moving around made me a more globally minded person than I would have been. Because of the moves, I was in different cultures, belief systems, and a different language every time. I consider it time well spent and never minded those moves because, rock bottom, they were highly educational.”

“I never thought about it like that,” Shep agreed. “I always assumed a woman wanted to stay in one place to raise a family.”

Willow knew she was stepping into forbidden territory with Shep. He’d never discussed his family with her. Would he now? “I don’t like the patriarchy’s job description for women: barefoot, pregnant, and house frau? Forget it. I liked that I had so many new adventures with each move. I always looked forward to them, and I did learn a lot, made new friends, and never thought it harmed me. Was that what happened to you? That you grew up in one place?” She held her breath for a moment, seeing a lot of emotions cloud his eyes. And then, those shades of feelings were gone, and he frowned, looked away for a moment, as if making an internal decision about

something. Finally, he looked back at her.

“This is an area where you and I had a lot of fights.”

“That’s an understatement,” she droned in a bored tone, eyebrows raised sardonically, mopping up the last of the stew in her near-empty bowl with the last of the bread.

“Yeah, well, no excuses.” He pushed his bowl aside and took a drink of his iced tea. Setting it down, he said, “My dad, Al, owned a construction company. He was a civil engineer. He created a company, so we didn’t move around at all. I grew up with the Pacific Ocean and surfing was my thing.”

“How about your mom?” Willow saw pain come to his eyes, watched him wrestling with a rush of sudden feelings. She had a bad sense about his mother. What had happened?

“My mother,” he said, sitting back, his voice low. He fought himself and forced out, “My dad divorced her when I was thirteen.”

Willow could still see the injury from that time in his eyes. “I’m so sorry, Shep.”

Shrugging, he said, “People get divorced all the time.”

She smarted beneath his statement but realized it wasn’t aimed at her. The faraway look in Shep’s eyes spoke of memories she was sure had deluged him through just this brief sharing moment. Wanting to tread gently, she asked, “So from thirteen on until you were eighteen it was you and your mom?”

“Yeah,” he muttered, shaking his head. “It wasn’t a good time, Willow. Damned painful for her.”

“And for you,” she said gently, holding his stormy gaze. His mouth was thinned, and she could feel him struggling with a lot of hidden emotions.

“I was collateral damage,” he grouched. “My mother... Well, it devastated her. She really loved my dad. He had an affair, fell in love with a woman in his office, and then came home one day and announced he wanted a divorce from my mom.”

Wincing, she said, “That’s so shattering.” And she could see the effects the whole ordeal had had on him in his expression. Shep was trying to keep that game face of his in place, but it wasn’t working right now. Her heart went out to him, and she had to stop herself from reaching out and touching his hand on the table.

“Yeah, it was like a bomb going off in the house,” he admitted in a growling tone.

“How did your mom handle it?”

“Not well.”

“What do you mean?” Willow wanted to understand how the divorce had affected Shep as a child. She saw him hesitate, his hand curling into a fist for moment and then relaxing.

“I knew this would happen,” he muttered, staring at her darkly.

“What?”

“For two and a half years you asked about my family and I refused to discuss them with you, Willow. And I knew, coming back here, we’d get into some kind of discussion about them sooner or later.”

Sitting back, she felt him resisting her again. Always! “Well, I’m not apologizing for

it, Shep. It's normal and natural to talk about one's family. I know how you feel about that, but if you really want to communicate with me, this is an area where it will happen."

He rubbed his stubbled jaw. "I've said enough, Willow. I don't want to talk about it anymore. At least, not right now. All right?" and he leveled a warning stare at her.

"Fine. But I do appreciate you opening up about it." And she did. "I can see you're trying, and that means a lot to me, Shep."

His mouth thinned and hitched. "Yeah, well, whatever..."

Withholding a smile, Willow didn't cross her arms, as she might have in the past at the word 'whatever', but kept her hands resting on the table, instead. Clearly, Shep was in pain and he was uncomfortable as hell. There was much more to this story, but she wasn't going to press for more right now.

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“I do appreciate it.” She wanted to ask why he was trying to open up to her, but figured that was a question for another time, too. “Would you like some dessert?” She saw him brighten a little. The old chestnut ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’ had never been truer than with Shep. He liked his sweets.

“Sure.”

Rising, she said, “Normally, Ethiopians do not have dessert after a meal. They like the flavors of the main meal to stay with them. Before the 1960s, they’d never even used sugar in desserts; always honey.” She walked to the kitchen and opened the freezer. “I love my ice cream.” She turned to him. “Are you game? Would you like some? We get this flown in from the capital. Dev knows the chef from British Airways there and he’s sweet on her. He’ll give her ice cream and she’ll put it in our dry ice chest and fly it back here. We get all kinds of flavors.” She looked at the container. “Tonight, it’s chocolate with almonds.”

“Sounds good,” he said.

“Great.” Willow felt relief flowing through her. Shep had FINALLY opened up to her about his family. Granted, it wasn’t much of a step inside his young life, but it was better than nothing. She placed two scoops into each bowl and carried them to the table, a spoon in both. The glee in his eyes reminded her of a little boy being given some nice, big surprise and she smiled as she sat down.

“No secret to you, Porter,” and she gestured to his bowl.

“Oh, I don’t know. You always accused me of holding secrets, Willow.”

She dug into her ice cream. “You still carry secrets.”

“It always made me uncomfortable to talk about them.”

“It still does,” she agreed softly, not wanting to compound the pain he already felt.

“Yes. But I’ve learned the hard way that keeping secrets about my past doesn’t work very well.” Shep replied, enjoying the dessert.

“Were you uncomfortable when Luke read your entire personal history? He must have because he’s the head of security and he has to know the people he’s protecting.”

“I got that,” he admitted sourly, scooping his spoon around the melting edges of the ice cream. “It made me rethink my hiding from my early years because I saw that Luke didn’t treat me any different than before he knew about my family.” He slid her a glance. “Looking back on it? I was ashamed of what happened in my family. It wasn’t whole, like yours was. And the naked truth was that I wanted you to think well of me. Not that I came out of a busted household.”

Willow hesitated. His admittance was something she thought she’d never hear from him. Setting her spoon down, she held his gaze fraught with raw emotions. Gently, she said, “No family is perfect, Shep. I think you know that by now? Look at my own family, Ben, my older brother by two years? He was always in trouble, unable to sit still, always restless and moving around. Eventually, he was diagnosed with ADHD, put on meds which he took until he was sixteen, and then threw them away, saying they made him feel horrible. From then on, he was in trouble as a juvenile with the police. He started smoking marijuana, and then started selling it on the side.” She shook her head. “He was a mess. And my parents were stressed to the max, like I was. I love Ben with all my heart. We had been close growing up, but I could never help him, Shep. He was very independent of the family by the time he turned

eighteen.”

Becoming somber, Shep said, “I remember. I was an only child, so I didn’t have the issues you had in your family.”

Willow nodded and whispered, “What I didn’t tell you, Shep? Talk about holding secrets, eh?” and she gave him an apologetic look. “My sister, Ella, died of leukemia when she was ten years old. I was twelve. Ben was fourteen. That’s when our family more or less imploded. Ben revolted when my mother left for the States to get Ella to a children’s hospital for help. I was caught in the middle between my brother and trying to keep the household going in my mother’s absence.” She saw his face fall, emotion clearly visible in his expression.

“Damn, Willow, I’m sorry.” He reached out, briefly touching her lower arm. “You never told me about this. That had to be devastating.”

Her heart swelled with so many feelings for him that she had to stop herself from throwing herself into his arms. Shep was a consummate lover. He knew how to hold a woman, love her, caress her, and then care for her. She didn’t know where he’d gotten that skill and understanding from. There was so much more to him than she’d ever realized, but their three years apart had given her distance and a new slant on their marriage.

Willow took a deep breath that came back out as a sigh and went on, “It was devastating. It tore our whole family apart. My father was in Turkey at the time with us, living on the U.S. air base. My mother had flown back to one of the premier children’s hospitals in the USA, living near it, hoping that Ella would survive. I was in Turkey with my dad and brother. Ben was running the streets of Istanbul with a gang, and I never knew if he was going to come home or not at night. I took the place of my mother by cooking, cleaning and trying to keep some kind of normality in our family.”

“And this went on for how many years?” Shep asked.

Willow looked him right in the eye and said, “Ella died a year later. Mom came back to live with us in Turkey after the funeral. My father had to keep flying with his squadron. He couldn’t just get up and leave the Air Force. But all that time before, when mom had been stateside, we’d had what I guess they term a broken home of sorts. Without my mom there, Ben revolted and took off on his own. My father wouldn’t be home for days at a time because of the duties he was responsible for. I was keeping the household stitched together the best I could, although it wasn’t good enough.”

“You were only twelve. How could you?” Shep asked.

She nodded sadly, remembering that time. “If Ben had been well, it might have worked. He was the firstborn, and should have taken over and been responsible, but he wasn’t. My father was at his wit’s ends and didn’t know what to do with him. We all loved Ben, but he divorced himself from our family in a way, with his choices. He’d rarely showed up at the English school in Istanbul, maybe attending classes once a week. I never knew if he’d be home for any meals. I was going to school. I made breakfast for us, made sack lunches, and then cooked our dinners at night. Sometimes, my father and my brother didn’t show up at all.”

“How did that affect you?” Shep allowed himself to wonder out loud to his ex-wife, even surprising himself in the moment.

Willow finished her ice cream and put the bowl aside. “At twelve I was just entering puberty, I had my own hormonal hell I was going through, weepy, crying at the drop of a hat.”

“And you didn’t have your mother there to help you at that time when you needed her the most?”

Stunned by his unexpected insight, she stared at him. A lump formed in her throat for a moment and she swallowed. “Yeah, I was an emotional mess with all those hormones coming online. I started my first period and she wasn’t there to explain to me what was going on. It scared me to death. I thought I was bleeding to death. My father had gone on an assignment for a week. Ben was off with his gang. I remember sitting there on the toilet, blood dripping out of me and crying. I thought I was going to die.”

Shaking his head, Shep muttered, “My parent never talked to me about such things.”

“Mine either,” she said darkly. “I went next door in our apartment building and talked to another American woman who was married to a pilot in my dad’s squadron. She was so kind and convinced me I wasn’t bleeding to death, that I was just having my first menstrual period. If she hadn’t been there, I don’t know what I’d have done, Shep. I was so scared and confused. She took the time to explain what was happening to me, and I stopped being fearful about it.”

“And your father was gone and couldn’t be there for you, either.”

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“Men know NOTHING about a woman’s reproductive system at all, much less their menstrual period. He’d not have been any help and would probably have gone to the woman I went to in the apartment complex, for help.” She frowned. “It was probably one of my darkest days, other than Ella dying.”

There was silence for a moment and Shep finally said, “I’m sorry, Willow.”

There were no words for how she felt, so instead, she just nodded toward him.

Giving her a wry look, he said, “Do you remember when you called me a dumb box of rocks?”

Groaning, Willow said, “Yes, and it was stupid of me to lower myself to that level with you. I’m sorry I said it, Shep. I really am.”

He held up his hands. “I had it coming, looking back on it. Sitting here and hearing the rest of your family’s trials, it helps me to see how it’s shaped you in some ways.”

“That’s called being empathetic. Something I tried to hammer into your head.”

“Well,” he said drily, “it eventually worked. It took me awhile to get the concept and then let my emotions start coloring my world. I can’t say it’s been exactly comfortable so far, but now; I see the benefits of it. I remember when you would talk to your mother about Ben and what was happening in his life. I never understood why you got so emotional after those calls. Now, I do.”

“I didn’t come completely clean about Ben,” she admitted, “he’s our skeleton in the

family closet, and I was ashamed of him.”

“I get that. My father is the skeleton in our own closet.” Shep admitted, a pain letting go in his heart from just speaking the words.

“Every family has at least one, believe me,” Willow told him. “I like that you’re working to become self-aware, Shep. I appreciate you opening up. And I’m sorry I didn’t open up a hundred percent about my own family to you. Maybe,” and she shook her head, “...it might have helped us when we got in that rough patch with one another.”

“Maybe it would have, Willow. We’ll never know.”

She felt the sadness in Shep and saw the regret in his eyes. “We’ve both lost a lot,” she whispered. If only she’d known, then what she knew about him now. “We both, at very important stages of our lives, twelve and thirteen, had horrible things happen to us. I lost a sister and my brother went berserk. You lost your father to another woman and your mother was torn apart by the divorce.”

“We’re kind of a sad pair, aren’t we?” he said, his mouth hitching in a grimace.

“Misery loves company,” Willow replied, giving him a half-hearted smile. There was so much grief pouring out of Shep. She saw his pained expression, so she dropped her tone and asked, “What are you the saddest about right now, in this moment?”

“I was sitting here thinking that if we both knew these things about one another during our marriage? Would it have changed the course of it? How differently would we have reacted to one another?”

“The million-dollar question,” Willow said. “I don’t honestly know, Shep. Do you?”

He rubbed his chin, looking above her head at the sunbeams defused through the gossamer curtains on the east side of the room. His gaze returned to hers. “Given where I was at the time? Closed up? Completely unavailable? Afraid to open up? I don’t think it would have made a difference. I was too afraid of my feelings. Afraid of what you would think of me if I shared my family’s nightmare with you.”

“And I didn’t know why you were reacting like that towards me,” she quietly admitted.

“I know. I didn’t help things at all, Willow. I made a hell of a mess that neither of us could stand living with. Something had to give, and it did.”

“It’s never easy talking about the pain we’ve experienced, Shep. It never will be, but in my case, my parents gave me the gift of supporting me, getting it out in words and tears rather than stuffing it back up inside, like you did.” She lifted her hands. “Hearing about your parents’ divorce when you were thirteen, it throws a different light on you, for me. It helps me understand the way you were shaped and fashioned by circumstances within your family. You were on the cusp of puberty yourself, and then to have your father leave? I can’t even imagine how you must have felt by the loss of him as a main support in your life.”

“Yeah, but I think our feelings were pretty much the same: grief. Loss. Confusion.”

“Right,” she admitted quietly, giving him a soft look of understanding. How badly she wanted to just stand up, walk over and wrap her arms around Shep’s broad shoulders. How many loads had he carried on them? And how many did he still carry? She’d had friends whose families had been blown apart by divorce. She’d seen what it had done to her friends. They’d never been the same since. Divorce not only fractured a family, she’d discovered; it also shattered a child inwardly, no matter their age. The only question that remained was: how badly shattered? Would that kid be able to fully heal from the experience or not? As far as she’d seen, children of divorce

carried those wounds all the way into adulthood and wrestled with them for the good part of their lives.

She went on to wonder if her and Shep's own divorce, her walking out on him, had somehow mimicked his father walking out on his mother and himself. It put a whole new spin on the situation and her mind took off at a gallop, knowing she had to have alone time to really feel her way through this new awareness.

"Thank you for opening up and sharing with me, Shep. You have no idea how wonderful it makes me feel. I know you said that you'd changed? But right now? I'm honestly seeing it." She reached out, tentatively touching his hand then withdrawing her fingers. "It takes real bravery and courage to live and not just exist, Shep. When I met you? You were existing. Not living. But now? I really see you living. That's a huge change."

"Well, don't paint me as any kind of hero too soon, Willow. Remember? I drove you away because all I knew at the time was that I was locked up and completely unavailable to you."

She shared a tender look with him. Choking back so many feelings, she said, "I always thought you were heroic, Shep, and it sure doesn't change how I see you now. You and your team risked your lives daily when you were out at Afghan villages trying to give those poor people a better life. You were my hero then. And," she swallowed hard, her voice going low, "you're a hero to me now."

CHAPTER 7

Tefere took the binoculars from Zere, his second-in-command. They lay in a grove of pine trees a quarter of a mile from the Delos School in Addis Zemen. The November weather was cloudy and it had rained the night before. They'd driven up in a rusted white Toyota van from Bahir Dar a week ago. He and his ten soldiers lay in wait, on

their bellies, well-hidden so that no one could see them where they'd taken cover within the tree line. Below, he saw three trucks on their way from the dirt-strip airport that was just a mile away. The twin-engine Otter, owned by Delos, the one with the red and yellow stripes running along the length of its fuselage, was constantly landing, and taking off. He'd counted four times today already that it had brought in what looked to be construction equipment.

His hands tightening on the binoculars, he watched as the three trucks pulled into the gravel driveway of the school. On either side of the vehicles were school children, aged between six and seventeen, boys and girls alike, all on their way into the one-story cinder block building. He knew from one of his soldiers, posted here a week earlier, that more than two-hundred children attended this charity school. His lip curled. The children all wore blue-and-white uniforms. The girls were all neatly clean, their hair either in braids, or knotted up on top of their small heads, wearing white blouses and dark-blue skirts. The boys all had short, shaven hair, and were dressed in their own version of the school uniform: white button-up shirts and dark-blue pants. Each carried a knapsack that was blue and white as well, loaded with books. The women teachers, all Ethiopian, stood in colorful dress, their heads wrapped in matching cloth, smiling, touching the children, and speaking to them as they filed in through the double doors. Hatred for the Americans and this charity they supported rose up in Tefere.

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He remembered his own bitter childhood years, growing up in a poor village to the south. His younger sister and brother had both starved to death. The only reason he'd survived was by being the bigger and stronger, stealing the food from their very mouths. His parents had always struggled to find food, as had the entire village. The drought had hit them hard. The agriculture that had fed the village for decades had been burned up by the sun, and the land had cracked and dried. The herds of cows, which had showed a family's wealth, had been slowly slaughtered and eaten over time. They had even drunk the cattle's blood to stave off the constant threat of death through dehydration.

His mind focused back on the present. For the past three weeks, supplies had been flown in, the three trucks carrying their loads from the landing strip ceaselessly up the slight slope to where the large school with its many windows stood. There was no greenery growing around the little campus, because of the drought. This area of Ethiopia was hanging on, but water was still in short supply. A week ago, one of those huge helicopters, known as a 'crane', had flown in a well-drilling truck.

The school was going to get a well, and that was a huge plus for them. The well-drilling crew had been working from dawn to dusk. The pounding sounds of the pipes being driven into the earth had been constant. The well was being drilled below the school grounds while other construction workers were laying open the land with a backhoe so that pipe from the well to the school itself could be laid into the ditch and covered with gravel and then soil.

Word of the new well had spread fast throughout the small town of twenty-four thousand. Tefere had watched parents of the attending children walk miles to come up to the school to watch the progress. Others owned a donkey and cart, and would

bring their whole family up to excitedly show them the well being drilled. It was a very big deal for Addis Zemen; everyone would have water, free of charge, and could come and fill their plastic gallon jugs any time they wanted. There was one pump inside the Delos school, and one outside it for the people of the town. Tefere had heard, as he'd walked the streets of the town, that the drilling crew was going to stay on, and sink three more wells nearby, in different parts of the city. No one would die from lack of water. That had been a momentous revelation for the gang lord. Climate change had made the rains that normally came to this region terribly weak and sporadic in comparison to the downpours they had provided in the past. This valley where the town sat had, for centuries, relied solely on water from the sky. Now, with the sinking of four wells, the Farm Foundation of Delos charity was working with the city fathers to lay out a long-term irrigation plan for surrounding farms to grow produce and feed the people. Indeed, Delos was on the lips of every inhabitant. There were even prayer services held for the charity in the Ethiopian Orthodox churches. Tefere scoffed at their stupid, blind faith in a God he had long ago stopped believing in. The only thing he believed in was his ability to survive.

The late November sun had just crested the horizon, sending its rays in broken, hazy beams across the lumpy, yellow, dried hills and the dead terraces around them, only highlighting the disaster the drought had brought. Soon, with a constant supply of water, those terraces would once again be filled with many kinds of vegetables. There would be the replanting of the many fruit and nut trees that had died in the drought, soon to be resurrected by these wells. The breeze was such that his flaring nostrils could smell the breakfast being served in the school's cafeteria for the children. One of his soldiers had told him that the children came in at seven a.m., had breakfast, went to classes, ate lunch, more classes, and then at three p.m., were each given a sack of snacks large enough for their entire family, and taken home by the six yellow school busses that lined up in front of the school.

Tefere felt the sting of bitter jealousy once again; each child looked apple-cheeked and a good, solid weight for their age. He'd been a skin-and-bones skeleton growing

up. His ribs had always protruded, his belly always distended.

The man in the red hard hat was the boss, his soldier had told him. Another spy that Tefere had placed in Addis Zemen had informed him that particular boss, a certain 'Shep Porter' by name, sometimes ate lunch down there in town around noon. And this 'Shep', it seemed, usually ate with Tefere's target of interest, the red-haired woman pilot known as Willow Chamberlin. The pair favored a tiny Ethiopian cafe run by several women, all widows. And many times, they would bring back dozens of boxes filled with sacks of the local fare the women had cooked up. Those sacks would be distributed among the hard-working well-drilling team and the security people.

Tefere's brow fell just even thinking about the head of security: Luke Gibson. He would bet good money that the tall, alert man, who always carried an M4 military rifle with the muzzle down across his Kevlar-covered chest, had been in the military. He always wore a brown baseball hat with that rising sun logo on the front of it. He was always wearing dark glasses and shooter's gloves. Those gloves were a huge reason why Tefere knew in his heart that the man was ex-military; Gibson had cut off certain glove fingers so he could have direct contact with the trigger on his rifle. SEALs did that, and so did Army Delta Force operators.

The security force hired by Delos was thorough and smart. They had four white Toyota Hilux pickup trucks, each with an array of radio and communications antennas and devices bristling from their tops. Two operators rode in each. Earlier, a small Caterpillar bulldozer, brought in by the crane helicopter, had created a long, oval dirt road ranging about one-quarter of a mile around the entire school, its playgrounds and buildings. The security men would slowly drive around this oval. The two security trucks would each go off in different directions so that they had eyes on the entire area. At night, these trucks did the same thing. The timing of when they made their circuits was always altered, making it all the more difficult for Tefere to move any closer to the school. And it was just another sign that Gibson was ex-

military. Vets knew that, by never doing the same thing twice, they kept any potential attack at bay. And it worked, damn them.

The next waves of incoming school children seemed happy, smiling and laughing together, as they disembarked from the yellow buses. There seemed an air of unearned pride in them, and Tefere snarled a curse under his breath, “The privileged little shits!”

The school had a kindergarten, grades one through twelve. There were fifteen teachers, a principal, an assistant principal, a school nurse, and many women employees making up the office staff. He’d found out from his spy that, while there were two other schools in this town, a lottery was held to choose the lucky children who would come here to the far superior school.

The chill of the morning made his skin bump up in response. He wore a matching heavy dark-green jacket and trousers, with sturdy leather combat boots on his feet. How badly he wanted to just march in and shoot up the school, as he had so many villages. But the big deterrent was that ever-alert, heavily armed security force. Every one of those men and women were military operators and he knew it. They wouldn’t only shoot to kill. Even worse, they’d hit center mass in his soldiers with their first shots and they’d be dead before they even got close.

No, his plans to kidnap the red-haired woman would not happen here. He had to devise another plan where it would be easier to apprehend her. If nothing else, Tefere had patience. And that had helped him build a five-hundred-man army over the last ten years. He would continue to have his spy follow this woman, find out her habits, and then he’d figure out the best way to kidnap her.

Removing his red hard hat, Shep was looking forward to seeing Willow alone, in her condo. It was the weekend, and he’d given himself permission to come back to Bahir Dar with Luke Gibson, to have some downtime after a month of hard pushing to get

the project up and on its feet. They sat on the deck of the Otter as it landed on the concrete airstrip at the large, bustling city near Lake Tana. The day was cloudy, maybe promising rain. Rain that was desperately needed during Ethiopia's winter season.

As Willow guided the Otter over to the Delos hangar, they were met by three Ethiopian mechanics. She shut off the engines and waited until they placed a hook on the main landing gear and started to pull the plane into the huge aluminum hangar with a small gasoline-fed cart. Unstrapping from her harness, she took off her earphones and set them on the cockpit dashboard. Turning, she saw Shep and Luke sitting cross legged on the deck a few feet from the cockpit entrance.

Dev seemed happier than usual and Willow, once more, wondered if it had something to do with Luke. For the first time, she saw her copilot actively engaging with a man on a friendly basis. It was probably only just that, she thought as she wedged between the seats and straightened up in the cabin. She felt happy at the thought that Dev had finally made some kind of peace with the opposite sex, but she still caught herself wondering if it was turning serious between the two, even as unlikely as that seemed. They'd been flying five to eight times a day in and out of Addis Zemen, and there'd been little time to chit-chat about anything else other than the on-loading and off-loading of the ferried supplies.

Shep unwound from the deck and gave her a warm look as she hunched over and walked past him to open up the hatch door. The airplane was slowly being taken into the cavernous hangar. She pushed the door in and over, her hands on either side of it, watching the two other crewman giving hand signals to the cart driver. The air was dank smelling, but at least the high humidity was decreasing. During the winter season, November through January, it was drier here, except on the occasional rainy day. She touched the tendrils of hair brushing her temples. They felt thicker and curlier. Her wavy hair did exactly what it wanted to do and, in high humidity it frizzed, which she disliked, but seemed 'tamer' today.

She felt Shep come up behind her. Not so close as to cause her discomfort, but she felt his presence nonetheless, and absorbed it hungrily. The last three weeks? They'd had little time with one another. About twice a week, he would drive her down to that nice little Ethiopian cafe and they'd order to-go for the security and well-drilling crews, plus eat a meal together there. And those were the only moments they'd had alone time with one another.

Willow had her condo, and she would finish each day by flying back at dusk or sometimes after dark, drive home with Dev, and crash on her bed, exhausted. Only later, after waking up around midnight usually, would she get out of her sweaty, smelly flight uniform and go take a welcoming cool shower where she'd wash her hair and scrub the smell of perspiration off her body with fragrant soap. At least, until she entered the cockpit the next morning, she felt clean. By midday again, both she and Dev would smell, but it couldn't be helped. They were constantly out on the baking tarmac with loud, belching trucks bringing supplies to be placed into the Otter, and had lengthy weight load calculations to consider on every flight. They were out in the heat and humidity of the day, sweating, and only dreaming of the air-conditioned comfort of their condos.

She'd tried to tone down her expectations with Shep. But hungering for deeper discussions with him, exploring him personally, and learning so much more about why he was the way he was, had driven her to ask him over for dinner tonight. Willow didn't know what was going on, why they were like north and south magnets, powerfully pulled toward one another. Again. This reminded her of when they'd first met, unable to stay away from one another whenever they'd had the downtime to spare. Her heart ached to have quiet, personal time with this man. Were the changes she was seeing in him real? Lasting? Or was he doing it on the spur of the moment to entice her in once more? She wasn't sure which was the truth and felt gun-shy.

Looking at her watch as the Otter came to a gentle stop, she saw that it was four in the afternoon. She felt Shep behind her, sensing again that he wanted private time

with her. The last three weeks had made her want intimate communication with him more, not less. It was like opening a treasure chest and finding that he was finally sharing some of those private hidden gems within, however painful that was for him. How hungry Willow had been for just such a breakthrough. Again, she wondered if all this was honestly real, or something he was wearing like a mask.

The two mechanics put chocks behind and in front of the landing gear wheels, then brought over a rolling staircase and slotted it against the fuselage. Only then, did they finally give her the signal that everything was locked into place, and they could disembark. She smiled and waved to them in thanks.

“Okay, all ashore that’s going to shore,” she called over her shoulder. She saw Dev hunched over behind Shep, close to Luke. Willow wished nothing but happiness for her friend. Could this truly be the right man to open her up? To help her heal? To learn that not all men were to be feared? Dev hadn’t been able to separate out her traumatic experiences with one man from all the rest. Maybe, just maybe, Luke was showing her that she didn’t have to be wary and afraid of him. Fingers crossed! She stepped down the ramp’s stairs quicky onto the concrete floor of the hangar, straightening to her full height, waiting for the others to egress.

Then, it was the usual uncomplicated transit back to the condo for all of them. Once there, the men went one way, and they went the other. Willow and Dev got off the elevator at the fourth floor. The silent look that Shep had given her had been filled with readable longing. Her heart was unsure what it would do when he was back with her tonight. Once in the condo, she checked her slow cooker that had wat in it. With lamb and veggies this time. The smells of spices filled the condo, and she inhaled them hungrily, her stomach growling. The sponge bread was ready as well. Quickly setting the table and getting everything prepared for Shep to arrive at five p.m., Willow then hurried to the bathroom to shower and wash her hair.

Shep tried to still his expectations as he stood at Willow’s condo door, and knocked

on it. At last. Three weeks of hell, not being able to have a moment alone together for some decent downtime with her, had finally paid off. The door opened. His heart thudded in his chest. Willow had traded out her olive-green flight suit, showered, and now wore a pair of light-blue linen slacks and a loose pink cotton top. Her hair was piled up haphazardly on top of her head with two thin copper combs. She was barefoot, and he smiled. She loved being barefoot and hated shoes, wearing them only when mandatory.

“Come on in,” Willow invited, stepping aside.

Shep inhaled as he entered. “Whatever you’re making smells great.”

“It’s that Ethiopian meal of wat that you’ve come to love,” she said, shutting the door and locking it. “Hungry?”

Shep nodded, following her in, appreciative of the sway of her hips. Seeing the table was already set, he noted that she’d poured some red wine in goblets, as well. “What are we celebrating?” he asked, pointing to the wineglasses.

She smiled and pulled out a chair for him. “Our quiet time and being away from that stress everyone is under. Sit. I’ll bring the wat casserole over.”

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He saw the sponge bread on the counter. “Let me help? Do you trust me to bring over the basket of bread?” and he slid her a teasing look. She looked damned delicious, her hair up, wild and unruly wherever the combs could not tame it. Willow always looked so young when she wore her hair like that.

“Sure. Bring it over.” She put on two oven mittens and lifted the steel pot off the Wolf stove. “You’re favorite wat meal: lamb.”

He set the basket of bread between their plates and stepped aside, giving her enough room to place the pot on the metal trivet in the center of the small table. “There’s nothing I won’t eat. Being in the military, you know we’re garbage cans. If it don’t move first? We’ll eat it.”

Setting the potholders aside, Willow grinned and nodded. She thanked him for pulling out her chair for her. After she sat down, he joined her at her left elbow. “You’re right about that.” she replied.

“We’ve been out at sites in Peru, in the jungle, and someone would kill a snake and bring it in for the meat,” he said. He handed her some of the folded, warm bread. Anything to touch this woman even briefly.

“Ugh, no snake meat for me.”

“Well,” he said blandly, holding up his bowl as Willow filled it with the wat, “it was better than starving. There’s not much protein in Peru, except for eating guinea pigs.”

“But they are such cute little things,” she said, distressed, filling her bowl. “What did

the snake taste like, Shep?”

“Actually, like chicken. The jungle has plenty of snakes, and the village where we were working made it part of their normal weekly meat source.”

Wrinkling her nose, she said, “I’ll stick to the known meats in the USA, thank you very much.”

“Hey,” he said, holding up his glass, “let’s make a toast?”

She raised her eyebrows, picking her own glass up. “Oh? What’s the occasion, Porter?”

He held her amused green gaze. “Us.”

“How so?”

“Because we’ve been working around one another for three weeks without ONE argument. Isn’t that a new personal best for us?”

Laughing, she toasted him and took a sip. Setting her glass aside, she said, “I guess it is.”

“When we were married, we fought nearly every day.”

“Sadly, we did,” she said, spooning in the delicious-tasting stew.

They ate in silence, the iPod’s classical music playing in the background. She knew Shep liked coming to her condo because it felt alive. In part, it was the green plants throughout it, but mostly because he’d always seen her as a bright spot in his life. There wasn’t a day that went by when she hadn’t looked forward to seeing him. She

and Dev stayed at their homes in Bahir Dar. Shep and everyone else had been over at that old barracks turned into a hotel at the construction site.

“I’ve missed seeing you around,” Shep admitted.

She slanted him a glance. “Why? Because we aren’t fighting like dogs and cats?” and she added a teasing smile, not wanting him to take it as a personal hit. He became thoughtful.

“You have always been the sunlight to my darkness. I know I never admitted that to you... until now...”

Her heart twinged. She heard the sadness blanketed in his tone, saw that familiar heat in his eyes, and knew Shep still desired her. She said, “I’ve always thought of you as the moonlight to my sunlight. Nothing wrong with that.” She saw his face grow more relaxed. It was true: they both were intelligent people and, whenever they’d chosen to mix it up verbally and spar with one another, it had always turned into a take-no-prisoners, blade-cutting duel. And they’d both been guilty of it. And now, they could admit it to one another, their egos far more mature and tamed than back then.

“I don’t mind being seen as your moonlight. It feels like a compliment?”

“It is,” she murmured between bites.

“Maybe, one of these days... if things keep up the way they are? I can be real moonlight, instead of the darkness I became in your life, Willow.”

She pushed her emptied bowl aside, pouring them coffee from a dispenser. “We didn’t always have darkness in our marriage, Shep, and you know that. We had good times, too. Laughter. Sunlight and moonlight.” She handed him his mug.

“Toward the end of it, mostly dark and stormy, though.”

Willow couldn't disagree. “What do you attribute to us not fighting with one another here?”

He laughed a little. “Absence in the other person's life? You're flying nonstop from dawn to dusk. I've got my head down on getting this project online and keeping it on a daily schedule. We rarely see one another.”

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“Hmm.” She held his gaze. “How about we’ve grown up and matured a little? Not the childish brats we used to be? We’ve had time to reflect on what we did right and wrong in our marriage?”

Nodding, Shep sat back, enjoying her company and the dark, rich Ethiopian coffee. “All of the above.”

“It’s nice to have two days off after the brutal schedule we’ve been keeping,” she admitted. “It’s supposed to be cloudy and cool this weekend. Maybe some rain if we’re lucky. I’d like to show you around Bahir Dar, take you out on a small motor boat so you can see Lake Tana. It’s really beautiful, quiet and peaceful. I think we both need that kind of environment.”

“I love the water and I know you do, too,” Shep said. “Sounds like a good destressor to me.”

“After we come back to shore, we can buy fresh catch from some of the local fisherman. I can make us a delicious fish dinner.”

“That’s a win-win for me,” he said. “If I wasn’t surfing? I was spearfishing in the kelp beds off La Jolla.”

“Yep, no surprises with you, Porter: food always got your attention every time.”

“No,” he murmured, “YOU get all my attention, Willow. Nothing compares to you and never will. Food comes in a very poor second.” He held her startled gaze.

She sat there not lying to herself: she had been aching for alone time with Shep. “Has the last three years mellowed you, Shep?”

“Where you’re concerned, yes,” he said, holding her stare.

Her whole body was flowing with quiet joy over his admittance. Was it possible that they might be able to get together again? Willow didn’t want just sex with Shep. She’d never been the type of woman to have sex for sex’s sake. There always had to have been a deep, ongoing emotional connection with the man first.

“How does that make you feel?” he wondered.

“Scared as hell. How about you?” and she dug into his pondering expression. She knew Shep was not the type of man to tease about serious things. Especially something like this.

“Same here.” He gave her a hopeful look. “Can we be scared as hell together?”

She tucked her lower lip in, staring at him. “You’re not teasing, are you?”

Shaking his head, he said, “I’d never do that to you, Willow. We might have had a lot of rocky ground between us, but I wouldn’t hurt you like that. God knows, I’ve hurt you enough, anyway.”

Willow wouldn’t argue that point, but she wasn’t about to drag up the past any more than she had to. “I guess,” she admitted, “I never saw this coming.”

“What?”

“You. In my life again.”

“But you knew I was on this project. You approved it, Willow.”

“That isn’t what I was talking about.” With all her heart, she wished Shep could understand the gravity and weight of what she meant, but his damned engineer’s mind couldn’t plumb a loaded word like ‘you.’ He was struggling, she could see that, but mostly he was confused by her statement. Maybe they would always have this mess of multi-level communication, each talking but the one not grasping the wholeness of what the other was really trying to say. How she wished that would change, but her gut told her it never would. Shep’s brain was wired differently than hers in that respect. But he wasn’t the kind of person to use it against her, either. He was always asking for clarification on whatever was said, or he’d stumble over a certain word with each of them taking it the wrong way. And that led to massive miscommunication and the verbal battle would begin. But sometimes... sometimes Willow just wished he could mind read her or tap into the emotional intelligence that all humans possessed, to understand what she was saying. She swore men were born without that connection that women automatically had. She’d seen it more or less in every man she’d ever dealt with professionally or personally. What a bummer. It was a loss for both genders.

“Oh,” he said, more in a growl of frustration. “Is this one of those times we had? Where I was supposed to plumb the depths of what you said?”

“Yes,” she sighed, giving him a tired look. She didn’t want to hurt Shep because she could see him laboring with it. “Look, it’s okay,” she said, holding up her hand. “I’ll re-explain what I meant. When I said ‘you’ it was about you. I’m wary of you, Shep. I still care for you. I didn’t think I would, but there it is.”

He moved the empty cup slowly around in his hand, staring at it for a long moment, his brows drawing together. Looking up, he held her gaze. “I guess, if we’re coming clean with one another on this? I’ve never stopped caring about you, Willow. I know I never said it in our sparse emails we traded with one another over the years.

Frankly? I thought we were done. You never gave any inkling in your emails that you still cared about me.”

“I know,” she said wearily.

“Well? Then it’s a fact we both still somehow continue to care for one another?”

She heard the hope in his low voice, saw the yearning in his eyes. Feeling trapped, she said, “Just like the engineer you are, Shep. You’re great at looking at all the puzzle pieces and putting them together to make a picture.” She saw him preen a little. Willow knew how hard she’d been on him leading up to her wanting a divorce. His confidence had taken a helluva beating. But if it had? Today? These three years later, he looked even more fit, more in command, and more a natural leader than she’d ever seen him be before.

“Thanks. At least I didn’t completely destroy this conversation between us tonight. That’s a little progress. Right?”

Willow wanted to hold him. Sometimes, she could see the hurt little boy recessed in his eyes when they would have verbal blind canyons with one another. Instinctively, she knew some of these communication issues had something to do with his growing-up years. Maybe that’s one reason why Shep appeared to bumble around and not understand her whenever she tried to communicate with him.

She stood, gathering the bowls and flatware. “I can see you trying, Shep. That’s good enough for me. Okay?” Willow saw such sharp relief in his expression that her heart twisted with sympathy for him. As good as he was at construction, his greatest weakness was not being able to communicate properly with her.

“Okay. It’s a positive start, Willow.”

As she took the dirty dishes to the sink, she still wasn’t sure, but her heart urged her to remain open and accessible to Shep. He had never been violent or cruel toward her. She rinsed off the dishes, wondering what would it take, then, to open him up more to her? Because of the family he was raised in, did it mean he saw all women through some kind of warped lens? If that were the case, it could explain why their marriage had never stood a chance.

CHAPTER 8

Willow sat in the prow of the local boat they’d rented earlier to ply the smooth, glassy waters of Lake Tana on a cool November morning. It was their second day off from the brutal construction schedule. She’d met Shep at seven a.m. and they’d driven down to the dock area on the southern part of the massive lake Bahir Dar sat on. She had a favorite fisherman and always rented one of his smaller fishing boats. Up until now, it would always have been her and Dev out paddling around the shoreline. This time, it was her and Shep and she allowed her feelings for him to surface and remain with her.

Everything was quiet apart from the cries of the gulls and white pelicans that plied the rocky and sometimes muddy offshore of Tana. The air was cool, in the high fifties, and some fog had formed here and there, giving the lake a somewhat mystical appearance to Willow, the fog a veil symbolizing two different worlds or, perhaps, dimensions to her. She dipped her paddle in and watched the smooth surface break, ripples forming as she pushed it backward to propel the boat forward. The craft also had a small gas engine. But for today’s trip, she wanted the quiet of paddles dipping

in and out of the smooth, glassy surface of the water, instead. The gas engine could be used later if they got tired of the physical toll of their excursion.

Above them, a blue heron flew over, heading near the shore. Willow enjoyed the flap of the large bird's seven-foot wingspan. Turning, looking over her shoulder, she asked, "Beautiful heron, wasn't it?" Shep was dressed in his khaki pants, wore a form-fitting dark-green t-shirt and his brown baseball cap with the Delos logo on it. She noticed he seemed happy this morning after their serious talk last night. Or maybe content was the word she was searching for? Secretly yearning for him, she watched one corner of his mouth draw upward a bit in a quirky half-grin.

"Yeah, big bird. Long wingspan."

"I wonder," she said, "if I see the beauty and color of the bird and you see the mechanics of it only? Our minds, which see things on a very different level to one another, at work?"

Shep dug his paddle into the wake of the boat and, using it as a rudder, twisted its shaft to keep their red and white, badly-paint-chipped wooden boat on course parallel to the shoreline that crept by about two hundred feet away. "I did appreciate the mechanics of the bird in flight. You saw the color, grace and movement of it. Nothing wrong with how we see things, Willow."

"No," she conceded, "as you've said before, if there are ten people in the same room, there's ten different realities."

"Right, and if we had ten other people in this boat right now? Between us, we would have a dozen different ways of looking at that heron that just flew over us, too, I think. Also, the boat would sink."

Willow smirked at his quip, saying, "I often wonder how anyone gets along in this

world at all, what with those kinds of multiple realities... how we all see things differently?"

Chuckling, he said, "Welcome to my world. I manage people. I run into this conundrum all the time."

Nodding, she said nothing, feeling the languor of happiness flowing through her as they rounded a small peninsular of the lake. "The place I want to take you is about a mile away. It's a bird sanctuary of sorts. Beyond it, about a mile further, is a family of hippos, and we do not want to go anywhere near them or their territory."

He frowned. "I know absolutely nothing about them."

"I've had a year to get to know them enough to learn that you don't want to encroach upon their territory because they can charge and kill you. They seem very docile and gentle, but if they feel threatened, they will attack first, and we wouldn't stand a chance."

"I didn't know that about them," he said, frowning, looking at the crescent-like curve of the shoreline coming up. "How about we stick to the birds today?"

"Anything with wings is okay with me this morning." Willow replied.

"I'm surprised you haven't taken any photos yet." She had a strap around her neck, the Canon camera it was attached to cradled in her lap. There was a waterproof plastic sack she'd put around the camera in case they tipped over and went in the drink. Willow had learned through rough experience to keep her camera protected with the strap around her neck, and the waterproof bag around it. So that, just in case it ever fell into the water, it wouldn't sink to the bottom of the lake and be lost forever.

“I’ll wait until we get to our birding area,” she said. The odor of the lake near the docks was of rotted fish, which she hated. But out on the lake itself? It had a clean, moist smell and she dragged it deep into her lungs.

“Sounds good,” he said. “Have you noticed what’s going on between your friend Dev and Luke?”

Willow glanced over her shoulder. “I guess I’m not the only one who sees it?”

“Luke is footloose and fancy free. I was kind of surprised that he seemed really interested in Dev. Not that it’s bad or anything. I guess I just didn’t expect it, was all.”

“Well,” Willow said, “look at us. We met at Bagram Fixed Wing Ops by accident, and we were instantly drawn to one another. Why would it be any different for anyone else?”

“You have a point.”

Snorting, Willow said, “Yes, kinda.”

He laughed.

There were so many good things about Shep that she found herself wondering if maybe she’d stuck in the marriage, that perhaps they could have worked through its rougher patches and survived. Of late, that’s pretty much all that Willow ruminated on, as she was now as she lifted her paddle once more. Today, she wanted to spend quality focused time on Shep’s family. Intuitively, she felt that was a major key to him. Would he go along with it? Remain open to her inspection? Or, closed up like a clam, completely inaccessible? Never had Willow wanted anything more than to crack open more of his background and family situation, like cracking open a rotten

clam shell and spilling out the bitter brine within.

“Well, what do you think, Willow? Are Dev and Luke in love?”

She smiled. “Love or lust? Both start with an ‘L’, Shep.” She heard him laugh and it had always lifted her mood in the past, as it did right now. A seagull drifted over their boat, looking down to see if they had any fish. They didn’t, so it flew on. To their right was a gaggle of about thirty white pelicans out feeding on the lake, getting their own fishy morning breakfast.

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“I don’t know Luke that well, but he doesn’t seem like a bed-hopper to me. Nor does Dev. What do you think?”

“I think you’re right,” Willow said. She saw a fish leap out of the water no more than twenty feet from their boat. “Dev has, well, a tough family history, and she learned at a very early age to be scared and completely distrustful of men.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. She’s a really nice person, a hard worker, and she cares,” Shep replied.

“Yes, she’s loyal, and she’s a great worker bee. I can’t see myself with any other co-pilot while I’m here in Ethiopia, to tell you the truth. We get along really well together. I love her dry sense of humor. It gets very dark at times, but she was in the Air Force, just like me and piloted C-130 transports. You know how military people defer to black humor when things go wrong.”

“Do I ever. Saves the day every time. So? Has Dev said anything?”

“Nothing about Luke, no. We’ve been so busy this past month, Shep, that I honestly haven’t had time to even sit down and have a coffee or chat with Dev. Just work talk.”

“You could have today.”

She met his gaze. “I chose to be with you, instead.” She saw his expression go soft for a moment, knowing her words had truly touched his heart. “And I’m glad I did.”

“It’s nice to be at the top of your list.”

She heard the deeply veiled emotion in his voice, taking note of it for later. Pointing ahead, she said, “There’s our landing spot. See that beach that’s curved in an egg-shaped harbor?” Her stomach was tight with tension. She wasn’t sure where their conversation would range or what Shep’s reactions would be to her purposely trying to probe him more deeply on a personal level.

“Yeah, I see it.”

“I’m taking you to one of mine and Dev’s favorite spots. We do a lot of deep, serious talking there. It’s quiet, beautiful and the birds aren’t afraid to be around you. I think you’ll like it, Shep.” She knew he always loved being out in nature. That was one of many things they shared and enjoyed. Also, he loved architecture as well.

Shep maneuvered the boat into the oval cove. As they got closer, he could see several shorebirds with long legs and curved beaks dipping into the shallows for critters in the mud. They all flew away as the prow hit the beach.

Willow quickly hopped out; her feet bare as they sank up to their ankles in the black mud. She pulled the rope from the prow, leaping to the beach and turning, hauling the boat up further so it couldn’t drift away. She gestured for Shep to come ashore. She enjoyed his athletic build as he moved; how lean and tight he was, that t-shirt outlining his well-sprung chest and those broad shoulders of his. Once on shore, he took the line as well and they both hauled the boat halfway onto shore, guaranteeing it wouldn’t float away.

“Great,” she murmured, going back to the boat. In the front, she had packed a small ice cooler that held their food. Shep leaned over the opposite side, pulling both their backpacks out. Willow found a dry log further up the beach, brought her socks and boots with her, sat down on it and pulled them on. In minutes, they had made their

way up a path that shaded them as they moved up the slight slope into the lush greenery. Willow had worn her khaki cargo pants and a pink sleeveless tee beneath her long-sleeved white cotton shirt. She could shed it when it got warmer or in a less shaded area.

Taking her knapsack, she shrugged it on. “There’s several hiking trails and this is a pretty popular spot. A lot of birders from all over the world come here and spend a day or more spotting and putting another bird or two on their lists.”

Turning, Shep saw a flock of pink flamingos landing further down the curved beach. “Those are beautiful,” he said, pointing.

“Yes, those are called Lesser Flamingos. See those bright-red feathers on their wings?”

Squinting from the distance, Shep nodded. “Yes. Red against the pink of their feathers.”

“The bigger flamingos don’t have those bright-red striped feathers. This bird is pretty rare around here. I was talking with the city biologist about it when she was out in this area, and she said that these beautiful birds are a threatened species here in Ethiopia. She said these birds winter over here at Lake Tana, so we’re lucky to see them at all.”

Impressed, he walked up to her, strapping on his knapsack. “I didn’t know you were so interested in birds.”

Her lips pulled away from her teeth. “Hey, it flies. Anything that flies gets my attention, Porter. Are you ready for a beautiful hike?”

“Yep, lead the way, Dr. Livingston,” and he shared a warm smile with her.

“There’s a gorgeous spot for lunch, but it’s about a mile one way. It’s worth it. Are you game?”

“Always,” he said, gesturing for her to take the lead on the narrow path.

Willow felt happiness flood her heart because, once more, they were in that cradle of good friendship, exploring and sharing the adventure they’d always had with one another. She saw it in the lighter color of Shep’s blue eyes and forced herself not to stare at that strong, male mouth of his. Memories of him loving her were just too overwhelming and luring her to a place she didn’t dare go.

Shep marveled at the beauty of Lake Tana. Willow was a fount of local information about it. Lake Tana was the largest body of water in Ethiopia and was forty-three feet deep at its deepest point. She went on to tell him that, in most places, it was only around eight feet deep. It was forty-two miles wide and forty-five miles long. On a map, it looked almost pear-shaped to him. As lakes went, he thought this was a very shallow one. Its great notoriety was that it was the source of the Blue Nile, which was the only water course flowing out of it. Fishing here was a huge industry that supplied fresh fish to the northern part of the country. The lake remained full due to the seven permanent rivers that fed it year-round, and forty other seasonal rivers added to its water volume. Around the lake, agriculture flourished. There were many fig orchards, which thrived in the heat and fertile soil. More than once, at certain stops along their trek where they could look down on the lake, he would see reed boats plied by local fisherman. Willow explained that Tana had extensive papyrus reed beds from which the ‘tankwa’ boats were made.

They walked up the large swell of the hill, ancient terraces built all around this side of it, its crest covered with a crown of verdant trees. His skin was damp already from the slight climb, the sun rising higher, drawing humidity from the lake below and sending it creeping up the slopes.

“These terraces,” she said, gesturing below them, “were created thousands of years ago by these people. At that time, the lake was much larger, and made terrace farming the way to go.”

Shep studied the yellowed winter grass. “From an engineering standpoint, they did a good job putting rocks on the edge of each terrace they built, holding in the soil and giving plants a place to take hold.”

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Willow smiled and held his gaze. “Yes, I remember you telling me about the Incan terrace farming you saw in South America. I don’t know if you remember, but you sent me a photo of the terraces at Machu Picchu, that sacred place of the Incas near Cusco, down in Peru. You had taken a train from Cusco, you said, down through the jungle to where the huge Incan stronghold had been built. And I remember thinking you were more impressed with the terrace farming than the actual temples built on that site.”

“You’ve got a good memory,” he said. “After we broke up, I took the undercover job and went to work for Delos. They sent me to that area to put in wells for the Q’ero Indian villages. That was a long time ago.”

“Impressed with my memory, huh?” and she laughed, shaking her head.

“I am.”

She sobered and said, “Well, I have a confession to make, Shep. Every email you sent me and every photo; I’ve saved.” She searched his eyes, his skin gleaming with perspiration from their hard hike. There was surprise in his eyes and then, something else, hope maybe? Hope for what? Them? Willow couldn’t answer that question.

“Well, since it’s confession time? I have kept every one of your emails and photos, too.” Shep said back.

They stood looking at one another and Willow ached to walk that short distance and move into his arms. Melancholy swept through her over the choices they’d made earlier in life, both right and wrong. Opening her hands, she whispered, “I don’t know

about us, Shep. In some ways, we seem to be on the same wavelength. In others, we act like aliens to one another, each speaking in a different language each other can't understand or even grasp what the other is trying to say."

He turned, tucking his thumbs beneath the straps of his knapsack, looking out over the calm, beautiful lake. "Yeah, that's about the bottom line on us, isn't it?" he said, and held her troubled green gaze.

She stubbed the toe of her boot into the ground, muttering, "Where we fit with one another, it was great." She lifted her head. "And where we didn't? All we did was argue, and scream and shout at one another."

"I hear you," he said, nodding. "I'm mostly at fault on that one. I didn't exactly handle it well."

Frustrated, Willow came and stood near him, close enough to feel the heat of his body. His profile was hard and she could feel him thinking. There was nothing weak about Shep. He was a warrior and a Type-A, driven to succeed, built for life's challenges. So was she. Searching his damp face, seeing the burning look in his narrowed blue eyes as he looked back from the lake view and studied her, she reached out, entangling her fingers in his. Shep's flesh was hardened, calloused and felt rough on hers.

She said, "I have another confession to make. I've been wanting to get somewhere quiet and uninterrupted so I could talk with you." She felt his fingers curve gently around hers, saw the softening in his gaze, felt his yearning for her. Mouth dry, she pressed on, her heart beating harder, trying to steel herself against his reaction. "There's a lot we need to catch up on with one another, Shep. And I don't know if it's something you're really interested in doing. Are you?" and she tilted her head, digging into his gaze. His fingers tightened a little more around hers, as if to keep her from moving away.

“I don’t know where this is going with us, Willow,” he admitted hoarsely. “But since coming here? Seeing you in person? It sure as hell beats emails being passed from time to time between us.” One corner of his mouth lifted a little, not a smile, maybe a grimace. “Look, I know I was the reason you walked out. At the time? I didn’t understand what the hell was going wrong between us. It seemed the more I tried to explain it to you, to separate out the issues, the angrier and more frustrated you became.”

“I couldn’t reach you, Shep. You were listening with your head, not your heart. This goes back to me being emotional AND mental at the same time. You had somehow cut yourself off from your feelings, except when we had sex. I LIVE with my emotions 24/7/365. You don’t.”

Wincing, he hung his head for a moment, staring at his dampened boots. Dragging in a deep breath, he caught her gaze. “You were right. I couldn’t get it... not back then. But I’ve had plenty of time to stand back from our crisis and really examine it, take it apart and study it. You know: That self-aware thing you were hammering me with?”

Willow wanted to cry because, as he rasped those words, she saw the deep wounding he still carried secretly within him. At least now, she knew intuitively that those scars originated from his family. “Well, I’ve had a lot of time to reflect back on my antics in our marriage, too. I can’t say I’m very proud of how I conducted myself with you, Shep.” She released his hand and took a deep breath, as if she were about to step off the edge of a cliff of no return. “Is it possible to EVER discuss your past with me fully?” Your growing up years?”

Frowning, he haltingly managed, “After you left me, I went in search of the self-awareness you always told me about, and what that term meant to you. I scoured the internet, and I found a guy, a therapist, in Cusco, there in Peru. He... Renaldo ended up becoming a great friend, over time. We’d get together over pisco sours at a local bar and just talk. He never charged me, even though he’s a very popular psychiatrist

in the region. He didn't make it like I was going to a therapy session. We'd just talk. I told him about us, about my lacking or misunderstood communications between us."

Relief poured through her as she listened to Shep. She saw how hesitant and unsure of himself he was with her on a personal level. That had never showed up in everyday professional-level situations while on this operation together. "Did he help you understand what I was trying to share with you?"

"Yes, it took about a year, and many pisco sours and talks at that bar, but I finally grasped it."

"And how did you then look at our situation? Where we got crossways with one another, Shep?"

He opened his hands and closed them. "It all went back to me not opening up on an emotional level with you, Willow." Shep frowned, started to look away but then held her upturned gaze instead. "I told him about my father's divorce from my mother when I was thirteen. And, just like you had told me much earlier, he pinpointed that as one of the reasons I shut down and went into my head. I closed off my heart because it was just too painful to leave myself open." Lifting his hand, he moved a few errant strands of red hair away from her temple, holding her teary gaze. "I never opened myself up to you. I did when we had sex, but then I'd shut back down, afterward."

A shiver flowed through her, one of relief that he was finally allowing her into the rest of the dark, family secret of his. She'd been right all along. "And when we loved one another? It was beautiful, heart centered, Shep and we both knew it. We trusted one another at those times."

She held his gaze and went on, "But you did close up afterward. I could feel it and I saw it. When we made love, it was communication through our bodies to one another

and it was always wonderful. But as soon as we were done, usually an hour afterward, I could feel you emotionally retreating from me, closing back up, and then, as always, I felt abandoned by you. It was as if you took your love you had for me and locked it away again so I could no longer be fed by it as you fed me when we had sex.”

“I got it,” he mumbled, avoiding her gaze. “Renaldo laid it out to me in a way I could see and grasp.” Rasping wearily, he went on, “I really did destroy our marriage, Willow. I nearly destroyed you. I realize now you were fighting back, fighting to save both of us, but I just wasn’t there.”

A tremulous sigh tore from her lips. “I didn’t know WHAT had caused it. I was blaming myself, Shep; that I was somehow lacking in something, and it was my fault that you remained closed up, and I couldn’t reach you.”

“No, Angel, it was all on me,” he admitted, sliding his hands in a comforting motion across her tense shoulders. “I’ll gladly take the blame, Willow. I have no pride or ego in this. It hurt so damned much when you left me.”

She rested her hands against his biceps, studying his agonized expression. “I felt like I was in a battle every day with you and we were stalemated. I had to leave you Shep, because I felt like I was dying inside, dying emotionally. You weren’t feeding me like I was feeding you with my emotions. There was no sharing along that level between us. I had to leave. I didn’t want to, but I’d done the best I could, and it wasn’t enough.”

He held her, bringing his hand behind her head, her frizzy red hair tangling between his fingers as he rocked her slightly. “Just let me hold you? I need this Willow, so damn badly.” He rested his head against hers, closing his eyes, absorbing her strong, warm, feminine body against his.

Shep could barely remain still, hold himself in control, as Willow sank against him, entrusting herself fully to him. She smelled so damned good to him, that ginger scent in her hair, her special womanly fragrance that hardened him until it was painful. Willow would surely feel the bulge of his erection, their hips against each another as they were. Her breasts, so soft and full, made his palms ache to touch them. So many past love-making sessions had haunted his dreams ever since he'd gotten to Ethiopia. Being around Willow was like an addictive drug. He lived to see her, even if at a distance. They were so damned busy, the tempo of the construction so high, that sometimes, they shared only a glance. But it fed him, his heart, his still-wounded soul, and he ached on every level to reclaim her. But how? How could he do that? Shep knew he wasn't the greatest at talking. Especially about things that he'd done wrong.

His therapist, Renaldo, had told him from the get-go to let his ego dissolve because it had no place in the mix when one person truly loved another. It wasn't about being right or wrong. It was about being a team. And, as a team, you learned to put ego and pride aside because they could destroy any union over time.

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He felt her relax utterly against him, her arms winding around his waist, pressing her cheek against his damp t-shirt below his shoulder, feeling her sigh what he hoped was her happiness at being in his embrace once more. He pressed a kiss to her hair, the strands tickling his face. “Willow? I’m scared to death, but I’m going to tell you what’s in my heart. I never did when we were married, but I’m trying to change that. I want, more than anything, to have a second chance with you. I want to court you. I want to hold you and listen to what’s in your mind and heart. I want to really listen and feel you emotionally this time, not just ignore all that like I did before. I want to try and share how I’m feeling with you, instead of shutting down and pushing you away from me.”

He felt her arms tighten around him for a moment, felt her tremble in his arms. It was driving him crazy what her answer might be. Pressing his lips against her temple, Shep rasped, “Tell me you want another chance like I want one with you? I know I don’t deserve it. I hurt you so damned badly and I’ll be forever sorry that I did. I want to make it up to you. This doesn’t have to be fast. I’ll take it at whatever pace you’re comfortable with, Willow. I know we can make this work. I feel it in my heart. I’ll try every damned hour to be a better man for you than I was before. Let me try... give me one more chance...”

CHAPTER 9

The late December winter sun in Ethiopia was bright, its warmth creeping into Willow’s clothing as she looked at the tall reeds that grew along the edge of Lake Tana. She was going to spend another rare free day with Shep. Another month had passed and the drumbeat of creating safer Delos schools in different villages was high and steady. With her floppy hat on, shading her face from the equatorial sunlight, she

felt the stress melting away. Her shoulders relaxed and she sighed. Maybe because she was, at last, with Shep for a few precious private hours once again. It was like getting her beloved chocolate to Willow. Since their last boating on Lake Tana in November, she'd rarely seen Shep. Mostly, he stayed in whichever village was being helped by the Delos construction crews at that time.

Shep sat in the boat's well, holding the handle of its old gasoline motor which putt-putt-putted away. A single line of twenty white pelicans flew overhead, looking like a string of feathery pearls moving across the sky. It was going on barely ten a.m. Willow had packed them a hearty lunch with lots of water bottles, stashing the whole fare away in their large knapsacks. Today, they were going on a real adventure! The sky held long white trails of what looked like mare's tails across the deep blue above them. There was no wind, and the sun warmed them.

Having lived here for over a year, Willow knew that the temperature moderated in the winter season. It was dry in comparison to summer, which brought so much hot and heavy humidity up from the lake then. Where had the time gone? Time seemed to have passed in a blink of her eyes. She had invited Shep to take some time off to start seeing the country and get educated on its history. He seemed eager to spend any time, no matter how short or long it was, with her. They'd rarely seen each other, what with the villages being prepped and ever more construction materials being flown in five to eight times a day.

The eucalyptus trees with their white trunks were thick along one area up on a hill of one of many islands they were heading toward. Shorebirds skittered back and forth along the muddy lakeside turf, and white pelicans in groups of ten or more were out plying the shallow waters for easy fishing. They passed a canoe paddled by an Ethiopian youth who had a fifty-gallon tank of oil behind him. He was most likely bringing it to one of those many nearby island where oil was needed to heat their thatched-roof huts through the winter. Willow pointed them toward a small inlet that had a poorly made wooden wharf of sorts, half of it rotted away from time and

weathering, floating haphazardly in the water around what was left of it.

“This is a narrow peninsula that looks like an island. We’ll head in over there and bring the boat up alongside that.” she said, pointing.

Nodding, Shep guided the slender wooden boat they had rented into the quiet, muddy waters around the decaying jetty. No one was around that he could see; only thick trees, plenty of rushes that were knee to waist high, and clumps of reeds at least ten to fifteen feet tall on the other side of the tiny inlet. A person could get lost in thickets like those for sure, Shep thought, having never seen reeds so tall that they stood like such an impenetrable wall. He liked that Willow had put her red hair into a ponytail today, her floppy hat planted firmly above it to keep the sun off her neck and face. She wore an olive-green tee under a long-sleeved khaki shirt, again to protect her fair skin from the equatorial sunlight. Willow had warned him that, where they had to hike, they would be getting thirsty fast, and there was no water, or food available on the strip of land that sat between Tana and a river whose other side was more like jungle. He liked adventures like this, and welcomed the break with Willow. Moments of privacy between them were so rare now. She and Dev were flying nonstop, and, at times, they even met their flight hour limits, and had to quit for the day. He was just as busy, setting up meetings and working with the construction crews, waiting for the building materials to be fully delivered to the first, second and third villages, all seventy miles away and on the other side of Lake Tana.

Willow carefully climbed out of the tippy little boat; the rope provided to moor it to the wobbly untrustworthy wharf post lying nearby. Once she was out, and had tied off the boat, Shep handed her both heavy knapsacks they would be carrying. Gingerly leaving the boat, he opened the straps on hers, and she shucked into them, rearranging the weight across her shoulders and back until it felt comfortable. He did the same, always looking around, inhaling the smell of mud, and the scent of rotting fish that, by the looks of it, some fisherman had scaled and gutted some days earlier.

“Ready?” she asked, all good to go.

“As I’ll ever be,” he said, tightening the belt of his own ruck around his waist. “Lead the way...”

Willow took off at a good hiking pace, but as soon as they got out of the inlet area, moving to the strip of the peninsula where there was plenty of rushes and underbrush to negotiate, often coming up to mid-torso, growing out of the flat of the land they were traversing. She felt thrilled to be away from all the flying and to be doing something like this that satisfied her curiosity, always having had a love of architecture and archeology. At this time of year, as they trod the trail toward the ancient stone monastery site, there was not a hint of any other human presence, neither seen nor heard.

Roughly one mile from where they’d tied their boat to the wharf, Willow wiped her brow as she continued at a hiker’s pace whenever possible, the rushes and marshy area left behind. Now they were on gravel, rocks and loose soil heading upward along a slope. The trees around them had thinned out considerably, not privy to the water nearer the shore. The sky was now mixed with fluffy white chunks of clouds, sometimes hiding the sun for a moment or two. She heard Shep’s footfalls not far behind her. Her heart sang. She hadn’t been this happy for so long that she almost felt euphoric; barely aware of her booted feet hitting the dry dirt trail.

Willow’s mind turned back to the routine they’d slogged through for what felt like forever; even though their work time with one another was always short and stressful, no time to even sit and chat, there had been a day when Shep had managed to get a few private minutes with her before she had to fly. She could see it now:

Men in small tractors were carrying continuous loads of construction equipment to and from their plane.

She and Dev had had time to go to the bathroom, grab a cold drink and snack at Operations, the control tower area at Bahir Dar airport, and then trot out to the revetment where their Otter sat. It was being loaded to the gills with equipment, concertina wire and a variety of tools needed for the different trades. But Shep had made time out of his impossibly busy schedule to be there and take her aside for a moment just to them. Yes, that day was still wonderful to her in so many ways.

She snapped back to the present: They were climbing one of the peninsula's many hills, and, as she rounded the trail, she saw the remains of the abandoned monastery. She halted, waiting for Shep to join her. He was sweating, too. The humidity around the lake was always higher than the surrounding areas.

From where she stood, she realized that what she had thought was an island they were on, was actually a peninsular arm jutting out along the shore of Lake Tana after taking out her map to get a closer look at the landscape.

Turning, she explained to Shep that they were still on the shore of Lake Tana and not an island within it.

He shrugged., "It's a beautiful area whether it's an island or not," he murmured, taking a bottle of water out of his pack, drinking half of it, and handing the rest to her.

Willow took it, thanking him. She was beginning to think that Shep really had been making some life changes since their divorce. Even out at the villages, she had sometimes been able to meet him at their dusty airports and see how he worked with the laborers unloading the Otter and with some of his construction team who had driven up in a couple of Toyota pick-up trucks. He was so much more open then, smiling more, sometimes laughing, which wasn't like him at all back in Afghanistan with his men and the Afghan soldiers. She drank deeply, then capped the bottle and handed it back to him, their fingers meeting. Her need for him was always present. And her pain over the way he had hurt her before had been dissolving during these

months of working together. “Thanks,” she said, wiping her mouth and then sliding her hands down her olive-green khaki trousers to dry them.

“Tell me about this place?” he urged, looking around.

“This was a fourteenth-century Christian church built by the local religious group here around Lake Tana,” she said, gesturing to the piles of rubble. “They made bricks from the mud, collected gravel and rocks and put them in a patchwork to create the building.” Taking her hat off and wiping her brow, she saw Shep’s immediate interest in the disheveled monastery. He was an engineer. A structure like this, although long ago destroyed and left in ruins, got his immediate interest. “The early Christians built monasteries and nunneries all around Lake Tana,” she added, walking forward toward the heaps of rubble that had once been a standing church. “There’s a lot of monasteries still working on the islands of Lake Tana.” She wrinkled her nose. “The only issue I have with them is that women are not allowed to go through and tour them, but a man can.”

“Not very fair at all. I guess they are Christians who still think women are unworthy in the eyes of a male god. Yes?” Shep replied drily and he shook his head.

She snorted and settled her hat back on her head. “To say the least. But here? Since it is a destroyed monastery and no one lives here or takes care of it anymore? Men and women can come here and look at what’s left of it.”

Shep walked slowly, stopping often around the top of the hill, studying the bricks, the wood that lay dry rotting here and there. At one point he knelt down, sifting his fingers through the dry dirt, picking up hardened yellow reeds that had once been the thatched roof over the main building. “It’s a shame that this was let go... to come to this.”

Willow joined him, standing by his shoulder, looking around the shady hill,

appreciating the light breeze through the eucalyptus limbs. “UNESCO has been working here for decades to help save the forty or so churches and monasteries that are still being used around the lake. One’s like this; they were built in a circular style with brick, mud and wood. A thatched roof was put on top of it. All the structures, even the ones that are still operating, need constant maintenance. UNESCO is helping to save them and that’s good. At one time, though? I’m sure this monastery held beautiful, sacred religious objects and art, but it’s all gone, now. Either stolen... or the priests took what was here and transferred it to another church or monastery.”

Shep moved his fingers over a brick that had broken, looking at the stones, reeds and mud that had originally created it. He stood, holding it between his hands. “This is a beautiful place for all this to have been built on.” He turned and he could see Lake Tana shimmering in the distance, a pale blue, a number of reed boats out on its smooth, glasslike surface. “It would take an archeology team of specialized experts to reassemble it at all.” He walked over to a once-dark wooden archway that had cracked, peeled and broken into several pieces. Leaning down, he moved his hands over the roughened, sun-bleached wood.

Willow couldn’t help but remember the same feeling, as if his fingers, as they trailed down the wooden archway’s roughened, splintered surface, were skimming over her body instead. She placed her hands on her hips, appreciating the quiet beauty of the place, ignoring her building need for Shep, and said, “I came here quite often the first year we were here. Usually, Dev came with me. We’d hike up here, have lunch and just be. I love the energy in this place, it’s very calming and sacred feeling.”

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“It is,” he agreed, straightening. “Those wooden arches were probably the entry point for the monastery.”

“Yes. As time goes on, and we’re not so frantic in the building-up phase? I can take us out to some of the islands to see Debre Libanos, Ura Kidane Mihret: working monasteries. Most of them are round in construction and with thatched roofs, but not all of them. As an engineer, I think you’d find them amazing and worthy of scouting out. And since you’re a man? You’ll actually be allowed inside the church or monastery to see the inner structure of them. Lucky you.”

“I wish you could come in with me,” he said, giving her an apologetic look. He continued to walk around the hill, inspecting items, large and small.

Willow followed him at a distance, smiling to herself. Shep was in his element. He loved learning, and she knew he’d never seen this type of building before. His focus was intense as he would stop, kneel, always touching wood, brick, or dig into the dirt, his curiosity always high and present. The breeze strengthened and she closed her eyes, lifting her face to the blue sky as sunlight lanced down between the white bark of the eucalyptus trees that crowned the area. Happiness overwhelmed her for a fleeting moment. Just that ripple of joy sent hope flowing quietly through Willow. She’d finally, grudgingly, that one night, known she still loved Shep. She’d never stopped loving him since, but she hadn’t been able to live with him. Not the way he was earlier. For some reason, Willow thought that, after she’d divorced him, that love would stop. But it hadn’t, much to her shock and surprise. She had no idea where that expectation had come from. Maybe based on other friends who’d divorced and moved on?

The love was still there, just as strong as before, despite the head-butting they'd gone through, the realization of which left her stunned and a little dazed. What the hell was she going to do about it? How was it affecting him? Or was it even? She was too busy in the buildup phase to have time to honestly sort it all out.

Shep's profile was strong. She'd often thought his face was hewn from granite. He wasn't pretty-boy handsome, but he had an arresting face, built upon life outdoors, braving the elements, not to mention whatever hard work was thrown at him. Willow knew they needed time to absorb what was happening to them. In some ways, she was reeling from it. Never in a million years had she entertained the thought that, once they met again after their long absence from one another's lives, her love for him would rise and be even stronger than it had ever been before. She scratched her temple, pushing wiry tendrils of hair away from her cheek. To say she was in mild shock was an understatement. Did she dare allow for the possibility of Shep walking back into her life once more? Was he feeling the same? Grimacing as she took the short steps down the hill to follow him around it, Willow warned herself that she might be getting out over her skis. One honest gut-wrenching talk with him two weeks earlier didn't mean he felt like she did at all.

Shep appreciated Willow's patience as he nosed around like a bird dog on a scent. The hilltop was large and round, some half-buried and scattered remnants everywhere. For him, it was like a treasure chest to be investigated thoroughly, completely; a picture of a puzzle, like a blueprint being created in his mind.

About an hour later, he ambled over to where she was sitting against the trunk of a large eucalyptus, opening her knapsack, bringing out their lunch. Glancing at the watch on his wrist, he saw that it was around eleven-thirty a.m. Willow had taken off her hat, and her ponytail hung long and frizzed by the humidity. Her natural beauty made him want her badly. Willow had not given him the green light yet to do

anything that was serious and personal toward her. He was afraid. Hell! Who wouldn't be? What would she think of him wanting to, somehow, bandage up their past, try and heal it, and start all over again? Was that even possible? Or, was it some ridiculous need of his alone?

Crouching down in front of her, arms resting on his knees, he said, "Hungry?" That was a loaded word and he saw her take it many different ways as she unpacked the plastic bags holding their lunch.

"I think," she laughed, "I'd better ask HOW you mean that word, Porter. You got that animal look in your eyes."

"Does that bother you?"

Her green eyes grew a darker hue as she consider his tease. "No." She handed him a sandwich in a plastic bag. "I don't scare easily. You know that."

"You're a very brave person," he admitted, taking the sandwich. "Thanks," and he sat down, cross-legged, a few feet away, facing her. "I'm hungry," he added, opening the tuna sandwiches she'd made the night before.

Willow ignored the layers to the word and pushed an opened bag of potato chips between them. "Makes two of us."

A silence settled between the two. The few birds that had been chirping somewhere above them, stopped singing. Shep broke the quiet, saying, "There's a lot going on. I was hoping, somehow, we might get a few hours of downtime during all this."

Her lips quirked. "Dev and I are working from dawn to dusk, and sometimes, into the night to get the equipment up to the villages for the next morning's construction."

“You are working hard,” he agreed. “My two teams are working sunrise to sunset, too. Everyone knows we’re on a razor-thin wire of calendar dates with each Delos school and when it should be finished.” He enjoyed the sweet pickles, and the slight taste of mustard and mayonnaise she’d added to the tuna. His heart widened with incredible joy as he saw laughter come to her eyes.

“You included, right?” and she picked up a potato chip, popping it into her mouth.

“Yeah,” he sighed, giving her a warm look, “I suppose so, but as the project engineer, I have a lot of different baskets with different things in them to keep my idle hands damned busy.”

“No kidding,” she muttered, enjoying her sandwich. She wanted to drown in his eyes, remembering the tenderness he could share with her, but she pushed that all away. What she really wanted to do was shove the food aside, say to hell with it, and grab Shep and demand how he was feeling about them. Was he even going up and down like she was in her heart? It wouldn’t be the first time she’d felt this way. He’d been so conservative when she first met him, and his idea of lovemaking had been bed only. That changed very quickly because Willow saw opportunity everywhere. And she saw him change his mind, too. She saw a look of devilry come to his gaze. “Are you trying to read my mind?” she asked.

Feigning ignorance, he said, “No, why would I even need to?” And he grinned. “You were always easy to read on the outside, Willow. You’re like an open book.”

“Yes, and you were like a diary: closed and locked up,” she muttered, frowning. Okay... that neediness for good sex was begging her to throw caution to the wind. She’d done it many times before with this man and he’d always been right there for her, no wilting lily himself. That was one of the many things she had loved about Shep: He was strong and brave and steady when he needed to be there for her. And when that wasn’t required, it was like a reset in him to go back to his unassuming,

quiet, contemplative, thoughtful nature. Otherwise, he was a pretty easy-going guy and that had always appealed strongly to her because she disliked loud, braggart, toxic alpha types. He was an alpha, just one of the quiet ones... until it became necessary to show otherwise.

“I don’t know about you,” he said, “but my fears about having to meet you once more after these last three godawful years, had me running scared.”

“Me too, Shep. When I got that email from Wyatt, I froze.”

“Really? You too? What is wrong with us? We’re not unintelligent people, Willow. And maybe that’s part of the issue? We’re too damned smart for our own good? We read things into situations that aren’t there? We assume too much? Not enough? After you left me, I tore myself apart mentally trying to figure out what I’d done wrong and how I could fix it.”

“Ditto,” she murmured, finishing off her sandwich, licking her fingers. “It takes two to make a marriage and it takes two to break one up. I never entirely blamed you for it. I was at fault, too, and I wish I had told you that before I walked out on you.”

“It’s always easy to see the other person’s weaknesses, but ignore our own,” he said, shaking his head.

“I went there, too. I admit it, I have a hair-trigger personality, I’m impatient, I get a fixed idea in my head and that’s all I see. I don’t always hear the other person’s conversation like I need too. I filter it out, and that’s not good, either. I know where my faults and weaknesses are, Shep.”

“Join the club,” he grumped, giving her an understanding look, his sandwich gone. He reached for a handful of chips from the bag, “but it’s terribly human. Isn’t it?”

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“No argument there. Has three years really changed us that much? Or maybe we’ve grown up a lot more than we realized over that time frame?” she wondered out loud, pulling out a bag from her knapsack containing more sweet pickles.

“I know the time has shown me a lot. Maybe I needed three years to dissect what I’d done wrong to cause you to leave me, Willow. I’m slow in some respects,” and he gave her a sad look.

“Well, I was a jet jockey going Mach three with my hair on fire and you were driving around a D-9 Caterpillar bulldozer that went five miles an hour. We weren’t the same speed and never will be.” She sighed, her voice lowering as she held his gaze. “Emotionally speaking, you barricaded yourself against me, but now, I understand a little more, why, Shep.” She gave him tender look. “You took a mortal emotional blow when your father left and divorced your mom.”

“I’m not into psychology 101 like you are, Willow. I’m a nuts-and-bolts kind of guy. I see black and white. All you see is the gray. I’ve been taught to look at something, find out what’s wrong with it and then fix it.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Exactly. But every man I’ve ever met wants to FIX what’s wrong. If I cry, you want to fix it. If something doesn’t go my way, you want to fix it.” Frustration laced her growl. “I wish men would stop trying to FIX things for us women and damned well fix themselves—first. That attitude of fixing drove me nuts. If I cried, I needed to cry. It feels GOOD to cry, and I know I’d told you that many times before. Crying, for me, is a RELEASE. I feel better offloading how I feel through my tears. But men never got that memo. The Patriarchy that runs this world, pure male and mostly WHITE, sent a socialized message from the time you were

born until you die, that men don't "feel" and they don't "cry". They have to be the tough, strong and silent types. You know what I say to that?! A big, fat 'Phooey.'"

Wincing, Shep looked away and nodded. "Yeah, I got that memo since we broke up." His brows fell, his voice roughened, and he said, "When you left, I cried. Many times. Does that count?" and he gave her a wary look, unsure of how she would react.

"Yes, knowing that means a lot to me, Shep, that you can admit you can let down, let out your emotions. I hadn't seen much evidence of your fix-it mode with me shutting down until just now, but honestly, we rarely see one another even now as it is. This construction job is on a tight timeline. I fall into bed every night, exhausted."

"I wish Delos could spare two more pilots to give you and Dev some rest." He sighed and shook his head, his voice low, "I know my bad traits, Willow. And I'm trying my damndest to fix myself, not you."

She gave him a look of understanding and nodded. "Well, I'm sure at some future point, I will cry and then we'll see how you handle it, big guy. Fair enough? The proof's in the pudding and words are nothing compared to actions. Right?"

He offered the last of the chips to Willow, but she shook her head. He finished them off instead and, crunching them, said, "Right."

Stretching his legs out, next to hers, hands behind his head and pressed in the leaves, he said, "It always bothered me when my mom would cry."

This was new! Inwardly, Willow perked up, all ears. Was he opening up more to her? She could barely believe that he was capable of doing so. "And I'm sure your dad tried to fix it?" she asked.

"Yes. But when you're a small kid and your mother is crying? It does something to

you, Willow. At least, it did me.”

“Well, on that one, we’re all built the same. If our mother cries, no matter what our age, we’re deeply affected by it and we should be. But when you entered our relationship, your rules have had to apply. Every time I cried, and it was usually because of a mission I’d just flown, you wanted to fix it. All I wanted from you... all I really needed, Shep, was for you to hold me, rock me and let me sob my brains out in your arms. I just needed you to be a safe harbor for me. And you always asked me why I was crying instead of just hauling me into your arms and giving me that protective, warm place with you. There’re times for logic, but there’s also time for emotional reactions and needs, instead.”

“I had my therapist friend clue me in on that one, too,” he admitted. “I understand now. As a boy, you’re taught NOT to cry. And no one taught me how to deal with someone who did cry. Men are supposed to suck it up, swallow whatever they felt and bury their feelings, forever.”

Willow knew she was out on the end of a fragile limb with him but asked a very important question. “Your dad didn’t want you crying, either?”

Shaking his head, he tucked the plastic bags back into her heavy pack. “No. I got the same brainwashing message that men and boys never cry. You just swallow it whole and pretend nothing is wrong.”

“I could see that if you’re in a combat situation, but any other? That’s not dealing with your feelings.”

“Combat makes every man cry.”

“Do you cry now?” she wondered, asking the question gently. His face softened for a moment, and he looked away. Willow could feel a barrage of sudden emotions

swirling around in him. He turned and looked directly into her eyes.

“I cried when you left. I’ve never cried so much in my entire life as the first year you were gone. I couldn’t stop crying. I holed up in the barracks, in my officer’s quarters, and let it go. Then,” he said with a shrug, “there would be times, even months later, when I’d suddenly need to cry. Luckily, I could get off by myself, hide, and let go. At first, I couldn’t figure out why these sudden storms of tears would attack me. Later, I figured out it was the cycle of grief because I’d lost you, Willow.”

Winching, she stared down at her hands clasped in her lap. “It was hard on both of us, Shep. I’m sorry I hurt you like that. That wasn’t my intention.”

“I know that now,” he offered quietly. He sat up, crossing his legs, looping his arms around his knees. Holding her sad gaze, he added, “I found out the hard way that crying isn’t that bad. Like you? After I cried? I felt better, not worse. So, I began to understand what you meant when you tried to train me up on simply letting you cry. I just wish that you’d told me you wanted to be held while you cried. My father never held my mother at times like that, either.”

“Yeah, like father, like son. That’s so sad,” Willow murmured. “It’s a relief valve and we need it very badly living on this planet.”

Shep kept his head down, replying, “Lesson learned the hard way, believe me. I was also afraid if anyone saw me crying? That they’d out me, mercilessly tease me, or embarrass me.”

“Another man might do that to you, but a woman wouldn’t. Hell, she’d welcome you with open arms. Crying together is good for our hearts and souls. It’s healing for both parties.”

“It’s been a big learning curve for me, Willow and I don’t profess to know it all. I’m

sure as we continue to work together, there's going to be issues to work out from time to time."

She was grateful for his can-do attitude about his own weaknesses he was trying to correct. "Look," she said, "I've got my own issues to work on, too, Shep. It's not just you are doing the hard work of changing and trying to be a better all-around human being. And if we both want this to change, we both have to come at it without ego and pride. I just couldn't do this again and fail," and her voice broke. Willow swallowed hard, avoiding his sharpened look. Forcing herself to hold his gaze, she saw incredible yearning in his eyes for her alone. It felt so good to be wanted with love, and she acknowledged that it was, indeed, that love still existed between them. "I WANT to work at this," she whispered, swallowing hard, "and I'm scared as hell because I don't know where it will go or how it will ultimately work out."

He leaned forward, moving his hand down her lower pant leg, a caress. A silent commitment. "We want the same thing. This is a second chance for both of us. I have no idea what will happen, either. Maybe start by becoming good friends again?"

Her skin tingled as his hand left her leg. "Everything's moving too fast for me, Shep. Aren't you scared? I know I am."

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“Yes, but I guess I’m scared and hurtling forward like a loose cannon of sorts,” and he grinned belatedly.

“Usually, I’m the one going Mach 3 with my hair on fire,” she admitted sourly, absorbing the surprising changes she was seeing in him.

“And usually? I’m the stick-in-the-mud having to be dragged forward by you.”

“Is there a middle ground?” Willow wondered aloud.

Shep held her gaze and said, “Don’t you think we’re finding that middle ground right now? That gives me hope.”

She thought a moment, his honesty breathing new life into what she thought was a lost cause, then replied, “Okay... I can’t disagree with us both working toward the middle. I can’t handle anything else right now. My focus is on my job and meeting the construction schedule. I think our personal lives have to remain just that: secondary to the demands on us right now.”

Nodding, Shep replied, “We just need to talk, Willow. And talk until we both understand what the other wants. I know we can do this...”

Suddenly, popping sounds erupted around them. Willow froze for a second. Bark by her head splintered, exploding outward. Shep was on his feet in an instant, drawing his weapon as he turned, placing himself between the barrage of bullets and where Willow sat against the tree.

CHAPTER 10

Willow snapped out of their warm zone together, leaping to her feet. Unlike Shep who always wore his pistol holstered on his hip, hers was in her knapsack. Bullets were snapping and popping all around them, coming from one direction. What the hell! She had no time, but her mind moved into threat-action mode. Shep was her shield as she scrambled to her feet. The roar of his .45 shook the area. Who was their enemy? All she could see was the winking of rifles being fired from down below the hill, up at them.

Escape!

Grabbing her knapsack, she yelled over the roar, "Shep! This way!" and she hauled the bag onto her shoulders, grabbing at his arm to get his attention. She'd never seen him in battle mode before, but the deadly intensity, the focus in his narrowed eyes, told her he was no stranger to this kind of situation. She gripped him, practically yanking him around before he heard her.

"This way!" she yelled.

He nodded, turned, and followed her as she ran down over the other side of the hill, escaping the barrage of bullets.

Stunned by the unexpected attack, Willow slipped and slid between the many trees that covered the entire area for as far as the eye could see. The leaves were many, dry and slippery. Shep caught up with her, still hanging behind, protecting her back. The shooting behind them stopped abruptly.

"Hurry!" she gasped as he ran on behind, off her left shoulder.

"Where are we going?" he demanded.

“The river! It’s half a mile. There’s nowhere to hide here,” she gasped, slipping, and moving around the low tufts of grass scattered with four-foot walls of reeds. Now, they were on flat ground and off the sloped hill. She dug in her boots, lunging ahead, running as fast as she could. Shep’s footfalls right behind her gave her a welcome but false sense of safety. Somewhere in her racing mind, she realized he had put himself between her and the threat. He was prepared to die for her. Choking up, Willow knew she couldn’t go there. Not now. Whoever was after them? That enemy was trying to kill them.

They ran hard, dodging between trees. Willow could smell the river up ahead, although she still couldn’t spot it. After another quarter mile, they might. She was gasping, her lungs burning as she continued the brutal pace. Finally, she saw Shep running at her shoulder. He had his .45 in hand, looking around, on guard, not taking their apparent safety for granted.

“Who the hell is doing this?” she demanded in gasps.

“My bet is that it’s David and his soldiers.”

She gasped in surprise, terror lunging through her as she ducked, dodging under a limb, straightening, trying to keep her feet beneath her. The leaves were ankle-deep everywhere and slippery. Even worse, she couldn’t spot fallen limbs or rocks hiding beneath them. “Why?”

Shep moved easily at her side, his head swiveling, always looking around them as they ran. “Either they want to kill us, or capture and kidnap us. I don’t have a clue as to why. The river? Are we jumping into it? Swimming to the other side of it?”

“The river leads us back toward Lake Tana. It’s only about three-quarters of a mile to the lake. Where is our boat tied up? That’s where the attack came from. We can’t go there.” She gestured through the thick woodlands. “It’s about a quarter mile ahead of

us. We're going to jump in, swim across it to the other bank. I'm hoping whoever is after us. They won't see us. I'm hoping we've gained enough of a lead that, by the time they get to where we are now, we'll have disappeared. They may not realize we jumped into the river. It's only about a hundred feet wide and about thirty feet deep. The current is strong, but we can swim and keep alongside the opposite bank. Then, disappear into the jungle and head for the highway, which is about three miles away."

Shep nodded. He twisted around, looking behind him. "You're right, we've been cut off from the boat. There's no way we can get back to it."

Willow was winded. Her calf muscles were burning with protest. Shep continued to protect her with his body, always alert. They didn't have time to get her .45 out of her knapsack. Luckily for her, the fabric was waterproof. The pistol would remain dry and usable. Her mind spun. Was Tefere David targeting them? She'd seen at least ten rifles winking up at them from the base of the hill. Most of the bullets had been aimed at Shep, but they'd been lousy shooters, all missing him. The soil had spat up around him in dirty geysers as he'd moved in front of her, firing back, protecting her as she'd scrambled to her feet.

If it was David? Her mind cranked over possibilities of why they had been attacked. None of the reasons were good. They all made her stomach twist in raw fear. She raced on, scared more than she'd ever been as a combat pilot back in Afghanistan. If either of them was captured? It would be a horrifying nightmare. David was known for sex trafficking, but she also knew him as a regional player in northern Ethiopia: he captured Christians, regardless of nationality or skin color, and beheaded them on the internet.

Oh, no... The terror she felt over possible capture increased her speed. Her calves screamed in protest. Her lungs burned with each hard ragged breath. Up ahead, she saw the flat green river.

“Any crocs in this river?” Shep demanded, breathing hard.

“No. No crocs in river or lake.” Thank God.

“Any other threats? Hippos?”

Willow knew how dangerous hippos were. “Not where we’re coming out of the river. If I remember right? If we go this way,” and she pointed across the river, “the main highway is about three miles away. Once we get there? We can flag someone down and get back into town.”

“Good plan.”

They went over a small rise and then, on the other side, was the wide, dark-green river. Willow skidded to a halt, gulping in raspy breaths. Shep halted, placing himself between her and the river, intently sweeping the area. They were both breathing so hard that Willow couldn’t hear anything else. She leaned over, hands on her knees, trying to quieten her gasps. “Do you hear anything?”

“No... not yet.”

She straightened, peering through the shadowy sunlit-laced woods. Here and there, her deceived eyes saw dark shapes resembling soldiers coming at them. It was just her wired-up brain letting its imagination run wild. But it scared her just the same. “What if they don’t follow us, Shep?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“No, we can’t take that chance.”

She saw him with his pistol in hand, holding it upward, ready to fire if necessary. Shep was on full guard, tense, constantly sweeping the area with his gaze, waiting and watching. Gulping, she gasped, “We have a cell phone with us, but I don’t know

if it will work all the way out here. We need to call Luke. He's back in Bahir Dar with Dev today."

Shep glanced at her, away from his scanning for a moment, and said, "Yeah, and I didn't think to bring our satellite phone with us. That was a stupid mistake on my part, dammit."

Willow reached out, resting her hand on his tense shoulder, the fabric of his t-shirt damp. "Don't go there."

"We were warned David was in the area, that he could go after us," he muttered, angry with himself.

"I've got the cell phone," she muttered back, hauling off her knapsack, kneeling, opening it up. She scoured the insides and found it. Hands shaking, she opened it and put in a call to Dev's cell phone. Still breathing erratically, she pressed it to her ear, kneeling, Shep guarding her.

Her heart felt like it was tearing out of her chest. There was no ringtone. She looked at her iPhone. No bars. Making a harsh sound, she said, "It won't connect. There's no tower nearby. Dammit!" Rising, she put the phone in a waterproof bag and dropped it back into the knapsack, zipping it shut.

Shep's mouth tightened. He jerked a look across his shoulder at the river. "We don't have many choices, Willow. These guys will know how to track. They'll follow us if they're serious about capturing us. And I think that's what they want to do."

"Then why shoot at us?"

"Hell, if I know. I counted ten rifles firing at us."

She stood, coming to his side, seeing the dark splotches of sweat across his upper body. She was running sweat as well. Her mind whirled with options. “Then, our only card to play is jumping in the river and riding the current to the other bank. That way, there’s no footprints for them to follow.”

“Right. They can’t track us any further if our tracks end on the riverbank.”

“But they’ll figure it out, Shep. They’ll know we jumped in. There’s only one way the river flows. They’ll follow downstream along the bank, trying to find us.”

Shep asked, “Maybe we’ll get into cell phone coverage heading toward the highway and can call for help?”

Grimly, Willow replied, “Yes, but we’ve got miles through the forest to reach that highway. Another possibility is to ride the current all the way to the mouth of the river, get out, and stay hidden inside the woods.”

Shep quickly said back, “Yeah, but what if David and his soldiers think the same thing? There’s at least ten of them. They could try and surround us or they could get ahead of us because they know this area.”

He was right. Willow swallowed hard, looking around, terror filling her. “You’re right. I say we go with Plan A: jump in the river, get out on the other side, make our way concealed through the reeds and tree groves and head in that direction, toward the highway,” She pointed toward the general area. “That doesn’t guarantee that David won’t find where we got out of the river, though. If he wants us bad enough? He’ll put trackers on both banks and follow it down. He’ll find where we got out and start tracking us again.”

Cursing softly, Shep considered the options. He looked up, at the sun climbing in the sky, at his watch, and then back over at her. “Agreed. We ride the current to the other

bank, climb out, and hot foot it for that highway.”

“Seems best.” She wiped her sweaty face, tightening her ponytail’s rubber band in her hair. She searched Shep’s hard, glistening face, seeing the warrior in it coming out now. It made her feel ridiculously safe when there really wasn’t any safety at all for either of them. “I know Dev and Luke were also going on a picnic this morning. I don’t know where. They might end up being out of cell phone reach, too.”

“Can’t be helped,” he muttered. “We’ll do the best we can. I don’t know how brazen David is with his soldiers. I don’t know if he’ll maybe even loiter around, watching the parking lot to see if we show up to get to your SUV or not.”

“I don’t know his tactics at all, Shep. I agree, we can’t go back there until we can either contact Luke or get through to General Hakym’s men. I have a phone number in Bahir Dar for the barracks they have there, but as long as we’re out of cell tower reach, it’s no good to us.”

“Out in the middle of nowhere,” he agreed darkly, his mouth thinning as he warily watched the area around them.

They were both breathing easier now, and Willow keyed her hearing. “I don’t hear men crashing through the forest. Do you?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything, Willow. These men are hunters. They know how to move fast and silent.” He glanced at his watch. “We need to get into the river.” He took his pistol, took the bullet out of the chamber and safed it. “Your knapsack is waterproof, mine isn’t. Let me put my pistol in there.”

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Nodding, she gave him her pack, watching him quickly squat and stow the pistol in it. As he seamlessly rose, he zipped it back up.

“Are you a good swimmer, Willow?”

“Yes. You?”

“I’m good,” he told her. “We need to put our boots in your knapsack as well. Keep them dry with our socks. We’ll take them off at the bank and then I’m going to put my knapsack on and carry yours by hand. I don’t want you wearing it while we swim, Willow. You could go down with the weight.”

“No, I can carry it, no problem,” she growled.

He gave her a patient look, keeping her knapsack in his hand. He cupped her elbow. “Come on, we have to go, Angel.”

Wanting to protest, Willow swallowed her words, hurrying down toward the river. This wasn’t the time to argue. Their lives were at stake. His hand was damp, but firm and stabilizing. Willow was no stranger to threat, but she’d always been in the arms of the sky, never on the ground. And this shook her as nothing ever had up in the cockpit of her jet fighter. They ran down to the sloping reed-filled bank. Shep sat, placing the knapsack between them, swiftly unlacing his hiking boots. She did the same. Taking Shep’s socks and boots, she pushed them, along with her own, into the bulging knapsack, zipping it shut.

“I’m taking the knapsack,” she told him firmly. Shep scowled and stood up, about to

protest. "I'm a good swimmer. It's bulky, not heavy."

"Let me," he pleaded, opening his hand toward her. "I can handle both of them."

Willow shook her head. "I'm a strong swimmer. Come on, let's get wet," and she quickly waded into the turgid green water, her feet sinking inches into the mud. Without waiting, she launched herself, diving out into the deeper part of the river. The water was shockingly cool, but she shook it off. Pulling one strap of the knapsack up her arm, she struck out for the center of the river where the current was strongest. She heard Shep leap in behind her.

Soon, they were in the middle of the river, being carried at a slow pace. Willow balanced the strap, pushing it up on her shoulder again and again every time it slipped down. The river tasted muddy. She kept her head above water, treading it, Shep nearby. Quiet settled in around them except for birds calling to one another as they flitted across the river.

The fear in Willow's heart began to calm the further downstream they went. But her gaze was always on the bank she felt the most afraid to see armed soldiers coming their way along it. Shep had maneuvered himself to her left side, so, once more, he was a shield between her and that bank where the soldiers might show up. There was that old familiar stubbornness in his expression, and she wanted to tell him how much she loved him. Willow had never been around him in a combat situation before, but if this was any indicator, she was seeing his tough, hard side. It made her feel a little better even though she knew there was no safety for them here.

The water began to chill Willow. The current was slow, and she wanted to hurry and hide from the soldiers that might be looking for them. Had anyone else in the area heard the gunshots? She didn't think so because the monastery was literally out in the middle of nowhere. She glanced over at Shep. He was doing fine from the looks of things. They didn't want to talk, for fear of being overheard. He threw her a thumbs

up, as if reading her mind. She nodded, her heart blossoming fiercely with love for him.

The water temperature was beginning to eat at her strength reserves. Her teeth were beginning to chatter, and she could feel her muscles start to twinge, telling her she was already in mild hypothermia. How much further? After almost twenty minutes in the water, she spotted a thick grove near the muddy bank that might provide cover and a decent landing point. But just ahead, she saw a lot of tangled trees and other jungle flotsam that had floated down the river right in their way, partially blocking them from striking out for the grove. But they'd seen no better option. This was it.

"Watch the trees," Shep warned, swimming strongly to the right to avoid them.

Willow followed, but she was slower because her limbs were beginning to feel stiff, almost unresponsive. Dammit! She didn't need this right now!

Just as she kicked hard with her feet, her pant leg snagged a branch beneath the surface. It pulled her around. Willow croaked and, as she flailed, the strap of the knapsack's harness slid off her arm and fell into the water, sinking immediately.

"Shep!" she cried. Water closed over her head. She fought the current, her pant leg still snagged on the branch of the log, holding her under. Panic started to rise in her, the cold water and current dragging her deeper. Twisting, holding her breath, she tried to jerk her leg free. It wouldn't budge! Now, real panic hit her.

Strong hands gripped her from behind, beneath her arms, thrusting her upward.

Willow's head broke the surface. She vomited water, cried out, and struggled.

"I've got you," Shep rasped, holding her head and shoulders above the water. "Try to relax," he pleaded, swimming hard against the current, trying to take her upriver.

“My pant is caught on a branch underwater!” she cried, coughing violently.

“Stay still, Willow—”

She tried, but the panic surging through her from almost drowning, her throat burning, her lungs hurting from swallowing water unexpectedly, all conspired against her. Shep was strong, steady, and he brought her around so that, as he leaned down and tugged on her pant leg once hard, it tore the fabric, and she was released from the hidden branch. Relief shot through her.

“Relax, I’ve got you,” he rasped against her ear and temple, sliding his arm around her chest, keeping her afloat.

Gulping, terror ripping through her, she surrendered herself over to him. Her mind was jumbled with fear from almost dying. Water was still funneling out of her nose, and she kept coughing up more of it from her mouth. She felt Shep’s strong body take her against him, as he struck out with one arm toward the far shore. Feeling terrible that she’d lost the knapsack, Willow realized she hadn’t trusted Shep with it as much as she’d falsely trusted herself. Feeling humiliated, knowing she’d now put them in even worse danger, she wanted to cry, but forced back the reaction. She kept trying to relax as Shep did all the work. He grunted and she could feel he was fighting hard to save them both. Teeth chattering, she could feel her body cramping and locking up on her. She’d have drowned if he hadn’t been here with her.

Sodden, weakened, she barely got to her hands and knees as Shep pushed her ahead of him and up onto the muddy bank. Tree roots were everywhere, reaching into the water for sustenance. She hated that she was trembling and felt so damned weak. Willow grabbed onto the nearest root, cutting her hand as she did so, but grimacing through the pain and hauling herself upward. Shep got behind her, hands around her waist, lifting her, pushing her up the low muddy slope of the bank. More than grateful, she finally found herself back on land, gasping, hot tears running from her

eyes, mixing with the streams of murky river water pouring down her face from her wet hair. She'd failed them both.

Shep was breathing harshly as he pushed Willow up and over into the yellowed grass growing along the bank. His only priority was to get them out of sight. Straight ahead, he saw a deeply forested area, the trees packed tighter together than the other cover options around. He heard Willow gasping, saw blood on her lower leg, her pant trouser ripped open. She was pale and shaken. No wonder. She was used to the air war, not ground combat. But, even if scared, it didn't stop her from struggling up to stand shakily on her bare, unprotected feet.

Rising, Shep slid his arm around her waist. "Lean on me." The only thing he cared about right now was hiding. Looking over his shoulder, he took them both, as fast as Willow could go, into the woodlands. He could see no one. Not yet. His gut told him that Tefere David and his men hadn't quit hunting them. They wanted them for whatever sick reasons they had. His arm tightened around Willow's waist as she wrapped one of her own arms across his shoulder, leaning heavily on him. She was limping. Blood was leaking down her leg. Had she injured herself on something beneath the surface of the water? More than likely, the hidden, jagged tree branch she'd been hooked up on.

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“Hang on,” he gasped, taking her deeper into the darker reaches of the grove. “We’ll rest in a minute. I need to check out your leg then.”

His mind whirled with options. Willow had lost their knapsack. It had contained both pistols, their boots, and their cell phones. Shep knew she probably felt terrible about it, and there was no way he was going to harangue her about it any time soon. Right now, they were running for their lives. The shade from the trees that grew thickly together here closed in on them. Even though they had lost their leaves for the winter, the tight-knit tree community did provide thick cover. Shep saw a slight knoll ahead, further trees and saplings cresting it. Maybe they could hide there for a moment and catch their breath. He felt Willow leaning more and more on him. Shep was worried. He knew her injury was serious. This was Willow: she would never lean on him like this otherwise.

“Okay, we’re going to get you sitting,” he told her as he guided her round the knoll to hide them, helping her turn toward him, keeping his hands around her waist. Willow looked bedraggled, her hair curly, wet and framing her pale face. He saw pain in her eyes, her lips compressed. She was brave and he loved her fiercely for her courage under the circumstances. The leaves crunched as he nestled her down, placing her back against the smooth bark of a large tree. There were a lot of saplings of different ages all around them, providing even more cover than he had hoped for. Rapidly, he took in her condition. The palm of her right hand was bleeding. Her right trouser was ripped, blood staining into the fabric above the unseen injury.

“Dammit,” Willow said, her voice off key, “a limb snagged me beneath the surface, Shep. I couldn’t get loose. The current dragged me under,” and she pulled back the trouser leg, revealing a six-inch slice up her calf.

“You couldn’t see anything in that river,” he muttered, kneeling over her leg, gently pulling her hands aside. “Looks like about a half-inch-deep slice into the meat of your calf. “Are you in a lot of pain?”

Tipping her head back, closing her eyes, she whispered, “Not in as much as I am for losing our knapsack.” She sat up, touching his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Shep. I lost everything we needed.”

His throat closed as he saw the tears glimmering in her darkened green eyes and felt her anguish. “Don’t worry about it.” He reached over, caressing her damp cheek. “It’s all right, Angel. We’ll manage without it.”

“What? We’re both barefoot, Shep. That’s going to slow us down a lot.”

He moved his hands around on her leg, studying the cut. It wasn’t bleeding much, and that was good. Another inch? That branch would have torn into deep muscle. Not good. Right now, it was a surface injury. A nasty one for sure, but not life-threatening and for that, he was grateful. “Well, for a lot of Ethiopians being barefoot is a common, daily experience. If they can do it, so can we.” He gestured to the soft mattress of leaves. “This will help protect the soles of our feet, so stop worrying. Plus... I have an idea.”

She sat there and watched as he straightened and took a Buck knife from a leather sheath on his belt. It was a short, sharp blade. Pulling out his t-shirt, he sat up and used the knife to slice around the wet fabric, quickly cutting and tearing off a two-inch-wide strip from around his waist. In no time, he’d fashioned a tight field bandage around her calf, knotting it at the lower end near her ankle.

Willow’s winced eyes unclenched and she said, “Feels better. Thank you.”

Shep replied, “I wanted to make it tight enough to give you some support on it.

How's the pain level?"

"It's okay." Willow said back, hiding a grimace. "On a scale of one to ten, it's a three. No big deal."

He smiled a little, giving her a warm look. "Let me see your hand?" and he held his own out toward her. He saw her nails were broken, some torn down to the bed, leaking blood. Shep wished it had been him who had been injured, not Willow. It hurt him to see her this way. He wanted to absorb her pain. But he couldn't, and so he just tenderly held her hand in his, slanting it gently a bit one way and then another to assess the damage.

"Just a scratch," she murmured, resting her head against the trunk, her eyes closed.

"It is", he said. Laying her hand in her lap, he cut another piece off his t-shirt, exposing his hard abs. Working out enough to earn them had paid off for him today. It had given him the extra strength to bring Willow to safety. He wrapped her hand, the stretchy fabric protecting the cut in her palm. Tying the bandage off neatly at the back of her hand, he said, "There." Studying her, he saw some pink coming back to her cheeks, her lips a little less tight. That meant she wasn't in as much pain. He fussed over her, because he'd seen the raw guilt in her eyes over losing their supplies and firearms. He saw her begin to relax beneath his care and attention. Shep knew that Willow would never forgive herself for such a transgression and that was why Shep was determined to get them out of this hot mess. Right now, Willow looked so damned fragile. He'd never seen her like this before. Again, he quietly reminded himself that she was a sky warrior. Not a ground warrior like himself. She had frozen for a split second when their unknown enemy had fired broadside at them. He hadn't. It had been muscle memory that had spun him around and into action. To give Willow her due credit, she'd snapped out of the shock and had gone into warrior mode right along with him.

“How’s the hand feel now?”

She lifted it, giving him a look of thanks. “Much better. Thank you. Where did you pick up first aid?”

He smiled a little. Pulling off the knapsack he carried, he said, “My Dad was a hunter and tracker. He taught me a lot.” Opening the knapsack, he said, “Bingo. We’ve got water and protein bars. That’s good.” He dug into it, pulling out a bottle and opening it. “Drink as much as you can. Everyone hydrates in a desert region.”

Willow nodded, feeling like she was dying of thirst. This water tasted clean and sweet, unlike the dirty river water she’d swallowed and vomited out. She only took a few sips, aware that Shep was watching her intently. “I’m done.”

“No, you’re not. Drink, Willow.”

“But you need some, too.”

“I’ve got four more bottles in here. I need you to hydrate. We’ve got miles to walk. And it’s bound to get a lot hotter today,” and he glanced up through the tree limbs at the climbing sun.

Seeing the worry in her expression, he reached out, moving his hand slowly up and down her uninjured lower leg to soothe her. Instantly, he saw Willow begin to relax as she drank nearly all the pint of water before handing the bottle back to him.

Somehow, he had to get them out of this life-and-death situation. Somehow...

CHAPTER 11

“You stupid cows!” Tefere David screamed at his ten soldiers. “I told you to shoot

HIM, not at her!” and he glared at his men. They had talked earlier to one of the fishermen on a dock and, although the Ethiopian did not know her name but had seen and remembered her frizzy red hair, had found out that Willow Chamberlin, along with another white person, a man, had rented a boat from him some hours before. It was easy enough to ask another fisherman on the dock, cutting his catch for the morning: which way had they gone. What color was the boat painted? Tefere always dressed like the locals, who had no reason to suspect the deadly cache of weapons stowed away in dark-green canvas bags, hidden from view in the gang’s pickup trucks parked nearby.

Breathing hard, he shook his finger at all his teen and older soldiers where they crouched on the hillside from which the enemy had slipped away. “Cows! Every one of you! You can’t shoot to kill!” He touched the long knife he carried sheathed in a badly scarred leather scabbard hanging from his left hip. “I ought to slice all your throats!” Satisfaction thrummed through Tefere as he saw his men’s eyes widen. He’d sliced open more than one soldier’s throat for screwing things up before. They all looked mortified as well as terrified, kneeling, the butts of their AK-47s resting on their thighs.

“Get up!” he barked. “Track them! We need to catch her! And do NOT harm her! Any of you get grabby and bruise her anywhere on her body? I’ll kill you where you stand! Now get up!”

Instantly, the soldiers leaped to their feet. They were dressed as civilians, in ragged-looking clothes, only their sturdy combat boots hinting at their true nature. Most wore turbans wrapped around their heads. Tefere stabbed his finger toward the biggest and most experienced soldier.

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“You! Start tracking them!” His gaze swept the group. “And stay alert! I want the woman! You kill the man.” Teka, the young lieutenant, gave a sharp nod, snarling orders at the others.

Instantly, the group raced up the slope toward the ruins. Walking quickly behind them, his AK-47 in his hand, Tefere glowered at the surrounding landscape. In some ways, it would be easy enough to track them, but in other ways, not so much. He couldn't believe his soldiers were such poor shots. They'd had plenty of time to hone their skills for years in Darfur, in southern Sudan, before coming back to Ethiopia. All his men were in their late teens or early twenties. He'd picked them all up around the ages of ten or less, saving them from the slow death of starvation. He had become a foster father to them of sorts. He's given them food for their bellies, something they'd never expected. He'd taught them how to fire pistols at first, and then later, as their arms grew longer and stronger, to shoot AK-47s. They were utterly devoted to him, worshipped him, in fact, and he could see the disappointment in their eyes that they hadn't killed the man. They strived to make up for their failure, inspired by his words and anger, combing the top of the hill, looking intently for tracks.

His mind turned with options. What would those two Americans do? He considered all white people stupid and greedy. The U.N. Peacekeepers at Darfur? They were supposedly well-trained but were a complete joke! The only U.N. soldiers he avoided were from Germany. Those guys damned well knew how to shoot to kill. Beneath their facade of legitimacy, they were brutal hunters just like he and his men. Oh, and not to forget the South Koreans; those bastards were ruthless assassins. The rest? Useless as teats on a boar, in his opinion. He'd been trained from the age of nine by an Islamic Somali group led by Cumar Hanad, who had links with Al-Qaeda, across the border from Ethiopia. He'd loved learning how to handle weapons. Even more?

Tefere coveted power. He'd had none since birth, but at nine years old, captured in a border raid and taken in by the Somali warlord, he'd found meaning to his life.

As his men spread out and searched like hunting dogs across the top of the knoll the ruins sat upon, David waited. He had changed his name to David because that biblical figure had slain Goliath the giant with just a slingshot and rock. Hungry to impress his new father, who doted on all the little Ethiopian boys he'd kidnapped, Tefere quickly became the favored youngster of the bunch.

At first, the best, grizzled soldiers would take him out to the henhouse where they'd give him a small hand ax. He was to catch the chickens, lay them out, chop off their heads, and then hand them over to the cooks. The soldiers wanted the boys to be sprayed and wet by the blood spurting out of the chicken's neck as it flailed and jerked around. He learned to like the coppery smell of blood. It was like a badge of honor, and he let the blood sit on his clothing for at least a week, drying, so that by the time it was washed by the Somali women at the local river, the blood stains would always be there. And that was to remind everyone who saw him that he had been blooded. He had killed and he would kill again when ordered to do so. Without hesitation.

Tefere wanted that red-haired American woman. She would be a real prize. He could take her across the Ethiopian border, into Somalia, and parade her in front of his father and warlord, Cumar Hanad. Indeed, he would be richly rewarded. Every terrorist organization wanted white, American women to put on video as they decapitated them. Cumar would glow with pleasure over such a gift. Pride flowed powerfully within Tefere at the mere thought. He lived to receive praise from the warlord. Plus, he was sure, there would be gold coins to back up the pat on his head for a job well done.

Willow watched as Shep pulled out his long-sleeved denim coat. It was heavy fabric. To her surprise, he used his Buck knife, cutting off each arm. And before she could

ask what he was doing, he pulled one of the sleeves up over her foot, covering its sole.

“This denim is going to last you well on the hike we’ve gotta make,” he told her, his hands moving quickly. “It will give the soles of your feet the protection they need.” He knotted the end of it in front of her toes, then used some white cotton cord he always carried to bind it around her ankle, making sure the cuffed material would not slip off her foot. “There. How does that feel?” he asked, lifting his head to meet her gaze.

“Amazing,” she admitted, moving her foot a little, the thick material remaining in place.

“Good, lift your other foot?” and he held out his hand, cupping her heel.

“How did you think of this?” she asked, stunned by how good the idea was.

Shrugging, he said, “I guess it’s that engineer’s brain of mine,” and he fashioned her second denim shoe, straightening and critically studying his handiwork.

“But, what about you? You have to have something to protect your feet too, Shep.”

He smiled and quickly cut up the rest of the jacket, placing two thick layers that would protect the soles of his own feet. “Engineers are always having to make do with little to nothing out in third world countries, Willow. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve jury-rigged things together to keep a project moving. My mind just sees things differently, I guess.” He sat down and swiftly wrapped each of his feet, enclosing them entirely, utilizing the rest of the soft cotton rope. “There.” He stood, walking around a little to make sure the material wasn’t going to slip or fall off.

Willow started to stand but he held his hand out to her.

“Let me help you? Let’s see how much of an aggravation that leg slice is going to be for you?”

She gripped his hand, feeling the strength in it. Choking up, she forced back so much of what she wanted to say; how grateful she was he was here with her. What if she’d come out here alone and been shot? She sometimes paddled the lake alone. What then? No one would be likely to find her. Of course, Willow always told Dev where she was going to be hiking or paddling, along with her objective and the time she could expect her home. Still, that would be too little too late, and the idea of being killed up on that knoll, lying dead in the ruins, chilled her, the goosebumps standing up on her flesh. Standing up, she released his hand and tested out her new ‘shoes’.

“This is wonderful, Shep,” she said, giving him a grateful look. Her heart ached with love for this man. There was so much she wanted to say but couldn’t. Not with the threat of death hanging over their heads. She walked over to him, wrapping her arms around his damp, sweaty neck, pressing herself against him and kissing him. All she wanted was to let him know that she loved him, even though they’d never mouthed a word of such to one another since their reunion. His response was hungry, eager, and she moaned as he wrapped her in a tight embrace, confirming what she already knew: that Shep still loved her just as much as she loved him.

As she regretfully eased away from him, staring up into his turbulent gaze, she whispered, “I want to survive this to be with you, Shep...” She saw the surprise in his eyes fleetingly, and then a tenderness that nearly drove her to tears as he cupped her jaw, kissing her with incredible gentleness, worshiping her mouth, worshipping her. It was as if they were in the first year of their marriage where everything had been heavenly; no fights, no disagreements, or misunderstandings. Just pure, beautiful love expressed for one another.

“You’re mine. You were always mine,” he grated, sliding his fingers across the damp but drying hair at her temple. “We’ll get out of this together, Willow. Come on...”

Giving a jerky nod, she held his hand, and they started down off the low knoll, weaving in and around the thick stands of trees and clusters of bamboo. Her nerves had settled down. The last adrenaline charge through her bloodstream had left her knees a bit shaky and Willow was indebted to Shep's hand clasping hers for the time being. He led her onto the flat and increased the pace of their walk once she'd found her footing with her soft new shoes. The thick carpet of dried leaves crunched constantly beneath their feet as they strode at a good hiker's pace, making twenty-minute miles.

Sometimes, Shep would stop, turn, and listen, his face intense, glistening with sweat, focused. She too, looked and listened.

"Nothing... yet," he grumbled, turning, tugging on her hand.

"You think they're tailing us?"

"I do. Back at Artemis Security, Wyatt Lockwood gave us the mission briefing on Tefere David. He's a hyena with no heart or soul. He was kidnapped at age nine by a Somali warlord. David was taught to kill at that tender age. Wyatt said he lives only to impress his warlord, Cumar Hanad. Once David gives his word about something, he'll do it or die trying. He needs Hanad's approval that badly. No, he's not going to stop dogging our tracks, Willow," and he shot her a grave look.

Mouth tightening, she whispered, "Okay... got it."

Shep could feel Willow tiring. They'd been slogging along for two and a half hours. They stopped to hydrate and rest ten minutes out of each hour but, other than that, she pushed on hard and consistently. Her face was pale. He suspected that was due to the heat, as it was past noon and the sun's rays bore down at their strongest this time of

year. They were both sweating profusely. The freeway was a lot further than he'd anticipated. He noticed that Willow was limping more and more as the hours wore on. There were airliners flying in low toward the airport, so they knew which direction they were going, like they had a compass of sorts in the sky to aid them. Besides, Willow was damn good at directions, and she would tell him to head further this way or another, keeping him on that invisible route that would get them out of this forest and to a major highway all the faster.

He hadn't stopped worrying about Tefere David. The hairs on the back of his neck were always up, warning him that danger was stalking them. He'd been in too many Afghan villages over his years in that country, to not trust his instincts. They had no weapons. All he had was a miserable Buck knife, which was a great pocketknife, but you didn't take one into a gunfight where AK-47s ruled. And he knew, by the sounds of the weapons, that they'd been AK-47s for sure, another sign it was David and his terrorist soldiers.

Slowing, he caught Willow's damp hand. "Hey? How are you holding up?"

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“Fine,” she gasped. “We only have thirty minutes to go and we should pop out near that highway leading into Bahir Dar.” She pointed in the general direction they were heading, the leaves crunching loudly beneath their feet.

“You’re limping more.”

“Tough. I want to get the hell out of these woods and flag down a motorist. Let’s push harder.”

He loved her spirit and he saw the hardness and perseverance in her green eyes and the set of her jaw. Willow had never been a pushover. She was a strong-willed, self-reliant woman. She didn’t need a man in her life to fix anything for her. Although he’d always found himself wanting to. “You’re looking pale.”

“I get that way when I push myself beyond my physical limits.” She gave him a quick grin. “Hey, I’m a jet jockey, not a ground pounder like you. I don’t even think you’re breaking a sweat, Porter. I’m swimming in it,” and she made a disgusted face, tugging at the tee that stuck firmly to her glistening skin.

“Well,” he soothed, “when we get home? I’ll draw you the biggest, nicest bath you’ve ever had. Fair enough?” His heart melted at the grateful look Willow gave him.

“Sounds wonderful,” she admitted, her voice suddenly scratchy.

Shep saw the tears appear for a split second in her eyes, and then they were gone. Willow had rarely cried in front of him when they were married. She always took off

and hid somewhere. There were times when he'd known she'd cried because her eyes had been red-rimmed. She would never talk about what made her cry. They'd missed so many opportunities to have serious conversations. He wanted to learn how to be a part of that emotional life she'd constantly accused him of never wanting to connect with. Yet, when she had a bad mission. She never discussed it. They both had top secret clearances and she could have said something to him but hadn't. If they got out of this alive? He was damn well going to do everything in his power to change that situation with Willow. They both deserved a second chance.

Near three p.m., Shep halted. The woods seemed to be thinning out ahead of them. He gripped Willow's hand. She was breathing hard, her face flushed. They'd run out of water and were nearing the heat-exhaustion stage. "Up ahead?" And he cocked his head, an ear toward a new and welcome sound. Was he hearing things or not?

"Do you hear that?" Willow demanded, her voice suddenly cracking with emotion. "That's cars and trucks less than half a mile from here, Shep." She looked behind her, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"I hear it," he told her. Catching her hand, he wrapped his fingers around hers. "Come on, last half mile?"

She gave him a weary grin. "Let's go for it."

And they did. There were always downed branches here and there, hidden beneath the thick layer of leaves. There was a slight slope downward and more than once, Willow would wince and almost fall. Shep would steady her with his hand on her upper arm, slowing down, giving her time to rebalance. As they came out of the line of trees, a modern-day four-lane asphalt road stared back at them.

They hurried across it, the traffic moving around them. On the other side, Shep stepped up, trying to flag down a large, lumbering truck in the slow lane.

It sped on by, honking its horn, ignoring them.

He tried a black Mercedes Benz coming toward them at high speed.

The driver flew by, going at least a hundred miles an hour.

Shep cursed silently, seeing a white Toyota Hilux truck chugging its way toward them, dark smoke trailing out the tailpipe. It was going slow enough that he stepped out in the middle of the highway, waving his arms for the driver to slow down and stop. The driver had gray, curly hair, close-cropped, and was wearing dark glasses. His face was deeply lined and Shep guessed the Ethiopian man might be in his sixties. He slowed and pulled onto the graveled shoulder, stopping in front of them. Shep hurried to the driver's side. He knew enough Amharic, along with a comfortable smattering of Oromo, and asked, "Can we get a ride with you into Bahir Dar? We need help. My wife is injured. We can pay you in US dollars."

The man pushed his glasses up on his head. "Praise Allah. Does your wife need help?" and he was already out the door, coming around the end of the pickup. The man hesitated as he looked at their feet. Shep wasn't going to try and explain. Uneasily, he scoured the slope and the thinning woods for any movement that would indicate Tefere David and his soldiers were just about upon them. What he didn't want to see was dark shapes hurrying toward them, raising their AKs. The man moved to where Willow stood.

She greeted and thanked the driver in the Amharic she had become fluent in over the past year.

The driver nodded politely toward her.

Shep admired her knowledge of the language, speaking it almost with the fluency of a native-born Ethiopian, unlike his attempts. The man, about five foot seven, wearing

jeans, and a white t-shirt with dirt smeared across it, stood, and listened respectfully to Willow. She made it clear they needed to get out of here pronto. That she needed to get to a hospital for her injured leg. Shep produced a wad of US dollars, and the man needed no further inducement, gesturing for them to climb in.

Shep placed his arm around Willow's waist, and he could feel her leaning wearily against him, trusting him with herself. It was a helluva good feeling.

"I asked him for his cell phone. He has one," she said. "Once we get in the pickup? Give Luke a call?" She pointed to mile marker nearby. "Give him this reference point?"

"Good idea," he said. "You sit between us. I'll take the door."

Willow nodded, climbing in first, watching as both men got into the truck from either side. They were squeezed like sardines in the small space. Slamming the rusted door of the old Toyota shut, the driver handed Shep his beat-up cell phone and then quickly took off. In the distance was the port city of Bahir Dar.

Shep didn't think he'd get Luke. He was right but got one of the security women on duty instead, Emma Anderson. He quickly gave her the details of their situation and the phone number of the driver's cell. Within five minutes, Luke was on the phone.

"If you'll take Willow over to the hospital ER? Dev and I will meet you there. Where are you?"

Shep gave Luke the marker number where they'd been picked up. Instantly, Luke swung into action, saying, "Okay, that puts you roughly five miles outside the city. I'm calling General Hakym right now. I'll be back with you shortly.

"Talk to you then," Shep promised, shutting off the phone. He'd given the driver

sixty U.S. dollars. The man's face had lit up, and he'd smiled, revealing the sight of half his upper teeth missing. That kind of money would keep him well-fed for a good six months, perhaps longer.

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The man stepped on the gas, the Toyota chugging along, one long-broken fender banging and hanging off at an angle on the driver's side. Shep placed his arm around Willow's shoulders. She looked relieved as he told her what Luke had said. Weariness began to set in on her sweaty, dirt-streaked features. They were both physically as well as emotionally exhausted.

Shep was so damned proud of Willow, of how she'd kept her nerve and kept up her pace during the escape from the monastery ruins and the hard march to stay ahead of David's soldiers. The edginess within him started to dissolve the closer they got to the city. Traffic slowed considerably, but their Ethiopian driver gleefully waded into it, making it look like an artform on four wheels as he snaked in and out of traffic like an Indy 500 pro. Within ten minutes, they were outside the hospital's Emergency Room entrance. As they pulled up, Shep spotted Luke and Dev waiting near the doors, worried expressions on their faces. Luke was standing solid, speaking with somebody on his cell phone. Dev, on the other hand, moved restlessly from foot to foot, her face even more readable and filled with concern than his.

The moment Luke spotted them, he made a slight signal and Shep saw two of his people, a man and woman, appear. They carried no weapons on them that he could see, but he knew they probably had something tucked away in their waistbands hidden beneath their lightweight jackets. Both had their game faces on, and both were at full alert. He felt Willow sag against him and for a moment, as the truck came to a stop, she placed her head on his shoulder. He kissed the top of her mussed hair, smelling the river muck in it.

"We're safe now," he murmured, squeezing her shoulders gently. "There's Luke and two of his security people. Dev's waiting to meet you, too. Let's get you patched up

and then we'll go home."

"Home," she murmured, slowly lifting her head, giving him a teary look. "Do you know how good that sounds, Shep?"

His throat tightened. "Yeah, I do," he answered, his voice low, barely holding back his own emotions of relief. They'd dodged a bullet, quite literally, and he silently promised her she was going to become the center of his life once again. This time, for good, if he had anything to do with it.

Luke opened the door and Shep slid out. Then, he reached in to help Willow slowly down from the cab.

Shep turned, shaking hands with the driver, who was grinning ear to ear. He thanked him in Amharic. The man more than deserved the life-changing sum he'd been paid for his assistance, and he handed him another wad of bills, probably amounting to a hundred US dollars. The driver clutched the prize, giving a seated bow, thanking him, tears in his eyes. Shep stepped back, shutting the passenger-side door and waving goodbye to the man as he drove away. Turning, he saw Dev hugging Willow. She was crying and Willow was fighting back her own tears. How like her. A combat fighter pilot didn't break down in tears in the cockpit, no matter how tough the stress and danger, and that spilled over into everyday life.

Shep gave them the time together they needed, and he saw the look on Luke's face as he struggled not to show any emotion. "Sorry to drag you out of your picnic plans," he said, shaking Shep's hand.

"Don't worry about it. I've got the Ethiopian Army on this," Luke continued. "They've got a helo in the air, with soldiers on board. The helo has infrared capabilities, so they're going to be hunting aggressively for that unit in the woods. I'd like to go with them, but you're my focus," and he grinned. "If they find them, they'll

contact me immediately with details and then I'll pass them on to you and Willow."

"Sounds good. I know you want a report on this, but I want to be with Willow in ER. I'm sure they'll just clean the cut on her leg out, stitch her up, shoot her up with antibiotics, and release her, but I'd like to defer the report."

Nodding, Luke shoved his hands into his cream-colored lightweight jacket. He was constantly looking around, not being obvious about it, but remaining alert. "That's fine. We'll cover it later. Right now, I want the Army to find those bastards. I figure that David and his soldiers were tracking you, but as you know, tracking is an art."

Grim, Shep said, "Yeah, and I was hoping like hell that they didn't have any good trackers among them. We were walk-trotting for I don't know how many miles. We put some distance between them and us and I think that made a big difference. Willow was carrying her pack that had our boots, socks, both our pistols and her cell phone in it. In the river, an underwater tree limb snagged her pant leg, and the knapsack slipped off her shoulder and sank. She would have drowned if I hadn't been there to rescue her. I'm worried about that knapsack being found and blowing our cover. Is there any way to retrieve it, Luke?"

Luke's gray eyes grew thoughtful. "As soon as I hear from the army about their search, if you or Willow can give me info on approximately where you lost it in the water, I can don my diving gear and go down and try to find it."

"Like your SEAL days," Shep said, grinning a little.

"Roger that. I don't want that knapsack found by anyone else."

"I agree," Shep replied. "I can go with you and show you the exact spot. The current isn't that strong, but if you can't locate it? More than likely, it will spill out at the mouth of the river and into Lake Tana."

“Not what we want,” Luke said, shaking his head. “You’re our project engineer. We can’t lose you. You’ve given me the intel I need. If we find that little blue boat you rented and where it’s tied up, that’s all the extra I need. The general’s soldiers will scour the area for David and his soldiers FIRST and then I’ll go.”

“Good,” Shep agreed. He shook his head. “Honestly? I wasn’t expecting an attack from David and his men. Last thing on my mind as we searched those ruins. It was supposed to be a day off and a picnic.”

“I warned you that David was after an American, preferably a woman.” Luke glanced over at Dev and Willow, who were just parting from their embrace. An orderly arrived with a wheelchair for Willow. She thanked him and gladly sat down, relief in her features. Dev accompanied her into the ER.

Shep said, “Wyatt thinks they wanted an American woman to behead on the internet.”

Shaking his head, Luke muttered, “I agree with their analysis. Dev is a target, too, and she knows it because I shared the intel with her. That’s an added reason she’s so upset about Willow, and you being attacked.”

“Sonofabitches are the scourge of the earth,” Shep snarled under his breath.

Luke clapped him on the shoulder. “I won’t argue that. You got out of there, that’s all that matters. General Hakym’s pilots will fly the coastline of Lake Tana in that area, looking for your boat. Be nice if they could catch all of them. David is notorious for escaping capture. Maybe this time, the general will get lucky. I hope so.”

“As soon as Willow is patched up? We need to get some rest.”

“I’ll need a report eventually, Shep.”

Nodding, he said, “Understood. Once you hopefully find that knapsack in the river. Willow and I will sit down with you and give you a detailed report,” Shep promised. He too, would like to see Tefere David caught along with his ruthless soldiers. But right now, his focus, his heart, was on Willow. He wasn’t sure if anything further would happen to them, but his heart was screaming at him not to leave her side. Would she allow him to stay over at her place with her? Help her through her leg injury? He knew the shock and trauma of the experience was still tearing her up inside. Would she say yes? He didn’t know.

CHAPTER 12

Willow could feel herself crashing after she’d gotten home and taken a long hot shower, washing her hair and body. Her leg wound had been stitched closed and the doctor had placed a waterproof bandage over it. He’d told her no baths for at least a week. That was a bummer, but she could live with it. Donning a long lavender t-shirt that hung just above her knees, she quickly combed out her red hair, allowing it to air-dry. Her mind and heart were constantly on Shep. He’d pampered her once they got home, bustling around and making sure everything she needed was within easy reach. And then he’d left for his condo to go get cleaned up and find a set of dry, clean clothes to wear.

The late afternoon sunlight lanced in through the south and west windows of her own place as she stepped barefoot out of the bathroom. It was quiet in her condo, and the relief that they’d escaped alive was still filtering through her. How close she and Shep had come to getting killed. The shock was still rolling through her and she could feel its cold presence lingering even after the hot shower. It had been barely an hour and a half since he’d left but she already missed his quiet, strong presence. Picking up her cell, she called him.

“Porter here,” he answered.

“It’s me. Are you clean yet?”

He laughed. “Yeah, pretty much so. Nice not to smell like muddy river water.”

“Tell me about it.” She licked her lower lip. “Shep? Do you feel like coming down here? I’d like your company.” There was a moment of silence. Willow swore she could feel shock coming from Shep even through the phone connection. Why?

“Sure. Can I bring you down anything with me? I’ve just made a huge salad and put chunks of tuna in it. Are you hungry?”

She smiled, leaning against the kitchen counter. “Yes, my stomach is growling. Bring it and yourself down here?”

“You set the table and I’ll be there in a minute,” he promised.

She clicked off the phone, her heart beating a little harder in her chest. Wrinkling her nose, she knew she probably looked shabby in her favorite run-around tee. Shep had seen her like this before, so she let that go. More than anything, she wanted him... his energy... his voice. It was stabilizing to her right now. Opening the cabinet, she took down two large bowls. There was what felt like desperation roiling within her, going up and down like a rollercoaster. Right now, she needed Shep’s presence... his touch... HIM! He’d saved her life.

The knock at her door came five minutes later and she opened it. Shep was wearing a

form-fitting dark-red t-shirt and jeans that lovingly outlined his hard lower body. On his feet where a pair of frayed gray tennis shoes without socks. He looked incredibly handsome to her, his hair still damp, slightly curled here and there, being so long and with such a mind of its own. He'd trimmed his beard, taking a piece of that darkness away from his face that always inspired her imagination. When he'd had that fullness of beard back in Afghanistan, it had made him look dangerous to her in a sexual kind of way.

"Come in," she said, stepping aside. In his hands was a huge, red ceramic bowl, full of salad and the promised chunks of tuna.

"Thanks," he said. "Kitchen table?"

"Yes," she said, closing and then locking the door. Even though Tefere David and his soldiers were somewhere out in the woods near Lake Tana, Willow no longer felt as safe as before. Following him in, she liked the way the man moved, his butt a definite plus in her world.

Shep set the bowl down. He looked over at her. "How are you doing?"

"Cleaner," she admitted, touching her dry tee. "I'm not real well-dressed but right now, I don't care." She saw the heat glimmer in his eyes as he grinned.

"You look beautiful just the way you are." He held out the chair for her to sit down.

"Thanks," she murmured, sitting. "I don't feel very beautiful to tell you the truth."

Shep sat at her left elbow, his own chair scraping the tiles as he pulled it to table. "You're in shock, and you're just feeling the letting-down process roll through you right now." He took the two wooden forks and hefted a good scoop of salad into her bowl. "What you need right now is to eat, hydrate and sleep."

“And how do you know all this, oh ground pounder?” and she smiled a little, watching him fill his own bowl with salad. He’d also brought along a bottle of balsamic vinaigrette, and she poured some over hers.

“Too much experience behind it,” he muttered, taking the dressing from her. “When you get shot at, mortared, or RPGs are flying your direction? You get the same set of emotional and physical reactions that you’re going through right now. First, there’s terror, then you’re afraid you’re going to die, and then you fight back or run. And whether you’re escaping by vehicle, on foot or by helo, you’re in shock. Everyone goes into shock when threats and trauma hit them, Willow.” He stirred his salad with his fork. “If you’re lucky and you make it out alive? Then you have the let-down phase. First, you feel exhausted because you’re experiencing an adrenaline crash through your system. Then, you get hungry and sleepy at the same time. I always tried to eat first and then sleep afterward. And while that’s going on? Your emotions are up and down like an elevator from elation to terror and back again, almost like a continuous, alternating circuit. You realize you just dodged a bullet that could have taken your life. And yet, you’re still alive, and there’s a miraculous feeling that you are.”

She poked at her salad, “You’ve really nailed it. That’s exactly how I feel: up and down.”

He chewed his salad and swallowed. “And I would imagine you’re feeling shaky and unsafe right now? Because that’s the next level: the realization that there is no safe place anymore.”

“Yes, I’m feeling horribly vulnerable.” She gestured with her fork toward the main door. “I locked that door. Normally? I don’t.”

“You need to lock it every time,” Shep warned her, frowning.

“I honestly didn’t believe Wyatt’s threat assessment about David wanting an American woman to... oh, god... to behead.” and her throat hitched over that last word.

He paused, his heart aching over her visible trauma at the very thought, and then continued to eat. “Artemis has access to the most advanced network of top-secret information in the world. They are on the A-list of every democratic country’s intel web. The type of intel they get is highly prized and yet, very few get it. When I sat in that mission briefing with him and the others, I believed every word he said about David. I knew the sources he was getting it from.” He held her gaze. “Now? I think you believe, too?”

Snorting softly, Willow said, “Yes, I do. Before? I thought Wyatt was over-hyping the situation.”

“Wyatt’s an ex-SEAL. They stick to brutal facts, not drama.”

“I got it, believe me, I got it in spades, Shep.”

Nodding, he continued to eat voraciously.

Willow ate, but not nearly as much as he wolfed down. Once she was full, she pushed the bowl away from her, picking up her glass of iced tea. She studied him from beneath her lashes. He’d gotten a lot of color back into his cheeks, his eyes sharp and alert as always, and then her gaze fell to that mouth of his. Despite the trauma she was experiencing, she felt her lower body turn up to a yearning stage. There was such a powerful, nearly overwhelming urge to make love to this man right now. It shocked her in a different way from the trauma, as the animal need surged wildly through her.

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“Lose your appetite?” he asked quietly, holding her gaze.

“Yes, I guess. I’m filled up, but so many crazy feelings are tearing through me, Shep,” and she gave a shrug. “I’ve never gone through this before.”

He reached over, capturing her fingers, squeezing them. “Most people never, in their entire lifetime, have to face a life-and-death situation like this. When you’re flying a combat jet, you’re above the fray. You don’t feel the pressure-wave blasts from the bombs you drop.”

Releasing a ragged breath, she nodded and whispered, “You were right about emotions. As a jet jock, I could handle them just fine. I could tuck them away, focus, and do my job without a hitch. But right now? God, Shep, I’m still shaking inside. I’m feeling things from one minute to another. I get flashbacks of the attack on us. My stomach knots,” and she scowled.

He set his bowl aside and took her hand, forcing her to look at him. “Listen to me, will you? What you need right now is to be held.” His voice deepened. “I can do that for you, Willow. I promise I’ll just hold you. Nothing more.”

She managed a wobbly half smile of a sort, lacing her fingers through his, feeling how roughened his flesh was, the hard-earned callouses of his trade, and how steady he made her feel. Swallowing, she said, “Shep?”

“Yes?”

“What... what if I told you I had this driving urge to have sex with you?” and she

searched his gaze. He didn't look at all fazed. Which surprised the hell out of her. Instead, his fingers curved more protectively around her hand.

"It's called survivor sex, Angel. And it hits everyone. Having sex reaffirms you're alive and not dead. It's a sort of instinctual survival reflex, I guess."

She frowned and then asked, "Are you feeling it, too?" When his mouth curved faintly, and amusement danced in his eyes, she knew.

"Yes."

"Is it a good thing? I mean this survivor sex thing. To act on it?"

It was his turn to shrug, remaining somber. "Depends on the people involved. For some, it's a good thing. For others, it's okay, but then one partner or both end up regretting it later."

"And you know this how?"

His brows raised a little. "Been there, done that... with you. Even though you didn't know it because I wasn't communicating how I was really feeling internally with you, Willow."

"...Oh...", and she searched his expression which mirrored her own regret. "I wish... I wish I'd known, Shep."

"Why?"

"Because I understand now, it's a driving force. It's a need to feel alive, to confirm you're still breathing. That my dreams and future are still here. Alive, not dead. If I'd have understood your need to have sex with me? I might have been able to contribute

or understand what was really happening to you more than I did, that's all."

"Willow? I never considered when we went to bed as just having sex. I might have with other women before you, but I never did with you." He grazed her cheek. "I always loved you. I made love WITH you. You were always sacred to me, as corny as that sounds. I never considered just having sex with you. Okay? And being completely open about it? With you, I could release my emotions. I could be a hundred percent there with you in every way. It was the only time my emotions rose and participated. It was always a good thing, and I was always grateful to you, because that only happen with you, if that makes sense?"

She sat there digesting his sobering admittance. Her heart turned and she felt warmth cascading through her. Just having him grip her hand like this was causing a riot of even more need in her. "Yes... thank you for telling me that. I never went to bed with a man without a strong emotional connection with him. I'd always seen it as loving him. Oh, I know most men see it as sex and it's a needy act only. Most men don't put emotions into it. For them, it's just getting off, is all, no love or care or consideration of the woman involved in the process."

"Well, that's true a lot of the time for men, but where you're concerned? I always saw you as the gorgeous woman you are and felt lucky to worship you with my love and care. What I have always felt for you was far more than what men feel for just a one-night stand. I was always with you, heart and soul."

"I didn't know until now how you felt; your emotions being such a part of our lovemaking... it's so good to know that, Shep."

"I aim to repair that damage with you, Willow, if you'll let me," and he searched her eyes.

She heard the unvarnished emotion behind Shep's words. Never before had he

allowed his feelings into the equation, but ever since this new beginning between them, she'd seen that he was trying to correct all that and reconnect with her more honestly and fully. Closing her fingers around his hand, she wanted to cry but fought back the reaction. He looked so grave, so unsure of himself, and it shook her deeply. Before, he had always been a bulwark that seemed immovable by human frailties such as emotions. But not now. Not with her.

“When we were running? Trying to save ourselves? I kept telling myself to keep pushing, Shep. And a big reason I wanted to was because I felt we deserved a second chance with one another.” She smoothed her fingertips down the back of his hand in a caressing motion. She saw vulnerability in his expression; the tenderness glistening in his eyes and showing in the way his mouth eased. It gave her the courage to go on. “I never stopped loving you, Shep. I didn’t realize that until you showed up here. I thought my love for you was gone, but I found out quickly that it was in deep hiding, was all.” She managed a crook of one corner of her mouth. “I’m coming clean with you because so many times in our marriage, I pulled my punch. I’m not going to ever do that again. I’m going to be brutally honest and up front with you, and I have no idea how you’ll take it, or me.”

Shep nodded and sighed. “There was so much I wanted to tell you earlier today when we were running for our lives, Angel. My love for you has never gone away, either. You have always been with me.” His hands tightened. “I want the chance to make up for the man I wasn’t with you. I didn’t know how you felt until just now. I thought I knew, hoped I knew. I was going to talk to you about it once things settled down.”

Willow gave him a soft look. “I’m so glad to hear that,” and her voice trembled.

“I’m here for you,” he rasped. “Just tell me what you need, Willow, and I’ll try to give it to you. I promise, I’ll keep talking with you every chance we get to be together. I’m going to flounder around, and sure as hell continue to make a lot of mistakes, but I’m trying...”

She pulled her hand free, pressing her fingertips against her closed eyes for a moment, trying to still the inner joy erupting through her chest. Her lips opened and closed as she struggled to get a hold of her escaping, exploding feelings for Shep. The look in his eyes, that love shining in them as before, was back again, but lidded. It was then that she realized he was hiding it from her, unsure of where she was at with him. That look melted her heart, seared her soul with such yearning for him that she could no longer fight it.

Opening her eyes, she whispered, "I want to love you. I want you to love me. Right now. No questions asked. I just need you, Shep. Will you come to bed with me?" Her voice was low and fraught with unsureness, pain combined with yearning. She saw her husky, emotional words strike Shep. He straightened, anguish and hope burning in his expression. Without a word, he pushed his chair backward, the wood scraping against tile. He walked around to her, sliding his hand lightly and gently against her hunched shoulders.

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“Come on,” he urged her, pulling her chair back for her to stand.

Willow didn't know who got undressed faster: her or Shep. Their clothes dropped to the bedroom floor. They stood naked before one another. The years apart had made him leaner, his muscles honed even more than she remembered from before. The look in his stormy blue eyes was the same: the consummate hunter on the prowl for his mate. And that's exactly how she had always seen them: as two wolves bound to one another for a lifetime, just as real wolves lived and loved out in the wild. She had never shared that image with Shep. Maybe now, she could? There was so much she wanted to confide in him with and, as he moved toward her, she felt her whole body throb with need for this man.

She released her hair, its thick red strands falling around her pale shoulders. She saw the pleasure in Shep's eyes as she allowed her hands to drop to her side. Unable to take her gaze from him, she saw how badly he wanted her, his erection thick. The sight enflamed her lower body, the ache for him rising to an almost painful level within her.

He walked over to her, cupping her jaw, tilting her chin slightly so their eyes met. “Are you protected?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I don't have condoms on me,” and he gave her a slight shrug. “I honestly never thought that we'd be getting together like this.”

She moved her hand across the proud line of his shoulder. “I didn't either. We never

used condoms before, so no worries.” Her voice was wispy sounding. Shep had that kind of effect upon her.

“Tell me what you want,” he said, moving his thumbs lightly across her flushed cheeks. “What about your injured leg? Is there a position that might be better for you because of it?”

Willow studied his hungry-looking gaze. “I think we’ll just have to find out with my leg as we go along. Right now? I want you. All of you. Any way we want it. Just like before, Shep. Nothing’s changed.” She saw one corner of his mouth hook upward. They’d always had a good relationship in bed. Willow didn’t think it would be any different now.

“Come one,” he urged her thickly, pulling her onto the bed and beside him.

They lay facing one another, and her heart was pounding urgently. Without a word, Willow leaned up against him, the aggressor, sliding herself against the black hair sprinkled across his broad chest. Instantly, he returned her kiss, slipping his arm around her waist, drawing her firmly against his erection. A throbbing ache centered in her, and she moved sinuously against him, hearing him groan. Covering her lips with his own, he took her hungrily, and she opened to him, to his exploration of her. Their breathing changed, growing quickly ragged as she eagerly met his tongue.

All the heartbreak, the lonely nights without Shep, melted beneath his taking of her once again. She could feel him opening up to her, as he had before, that beautiful emotional vulnerability that she wanted from him all the time, not just in their shared bed. Right now, Willow was grateful that she even had this with him. His mouth slid commandingly across hers and she responded in kind, sliding her fingers through his thick, slightly curled hair. His roughened hands roved down her back, cupping her cheeks, lifting one of her legs over his, opening her to him. She gloried in his hunger. It matched her own. Making a soft sound as his fingers curved beneath her exposed

thigh resting on his own, moving through the slick fluids at her entrance, she quivered with raw anticipation and let out a moan of utter expectation and need.

The moment his fingers began to slide into her fluids, exploring her folds, she moaned deeper. Breaking her kiss with him, she shifted, and he removed his hand, watching her, reading her. She smiled a little, lifting herself up and over him, pushing his back against the mattress. “I want to do it this way,” she said, her voice low and ragged. She saw him smile a little, that familiar glittering animal-like amusement in his eyes as he curved his hands around her waist, gliding her across his hips. As he settled her wet core over his erection, they both groaned in mutual appreciation of the heated, liquid moment.

Willow tipped her head back, her fingertips grazing his hard abs as she slid her thighs tight against his narrow hips. Oh! He felt so good against her aching entrance! Sliding back and forth, her fluid thickening, preparing for his entrance into her, she closed her eyes, making a humming sound of appreciation. Shep was well-endowed, no question. There had never been anything normal about this man of hers. Good or bad. Her mind dissolved as he brought his hands around her hips, anchoring her deeply against the length of his erection, engaging her swollen knot that throbbed and screamed for release. The smell of him: the lime soap he’d showered with, and that darker, sexual scent of his maleness combined with the euphoric fragrance unique and shared between them, entered her flared nostrils as he slid herself back and forth upon him.

An orgasm ripped through her, her fingers dug convulsively into his chest wall, a ragged cry tearing from her lips as she froze in absolute pleasure. But Shep knew to keep moving her even though she was paralyzed by the rushing, rippling heat blossoming swiftly within her lower body, rippling outward in larger and larger circles of heat. She couldn’t move, the intense pleasure so all-consuming. He knew to keep her sliding against him, keep engaging her hungry body, amping up as the release of her sweet, hot fluids flowed like a thick river down through her channel,

coating him, making it an even more delicious sensation as he continued to milk her willing body.

The intensity of the orgasm was so deep that, for stolen seconds, Willow became semi-conscious, encircled in a white-hot universe of wonderful arcs racing swiftly throughout her. Heart ballooning with love for Shep because he wanted her to enjoy those moments fully, her love overwhelmed even her sexual response, drowning her in a brilliant golden light that surrounded her. If she had ever doubted his love for her, it was being expressed right now. Most men did not know how to prolong a woman's orgasm. But he did. And he hurled her out into sparkling lights, dancing stars, and spiraling galaxies spinning around behind her tightly shut eyes. Willow heard from far away, as if become an astronaut out in actual space, her own cries of satiation and gratification tearing from her earthbound lips. She could feel Shep's response, his care and love of her, as he made the orgasm last so long that she thought she would faint from the intense, ongoing pleasure it kept providing.

Finally, he stopped moving her upon him. She collapsed upon his long, lean body, head resting on his shoulder, perspiration sliding and mingling between them. Eyes closed, Willow absorbed his scent, his strength, and the tender way he now moved his hand slowly up and down her spine, taming the wildness with his tenderness. Her brow rested against his jaw. She could feel herself responding to every touch, every caress he gave her. He kissed her hair and she nuzzled against him, her hand sliding up across his tense chest, curving around his neck, holding him even closer, if that were possible. For untold moments, she felt herself melting into him, becoming a part of him until she couldn't define where one of them began or ended with the other.

Slowly, over the minutes, she came out of that cradle of the magnificent universe where she loved to go whenever Shep triggered her orgasm. Somewhere in her fragmented, barely functioning mind, she realized that he had not come, that he'd held back for her sake. Turning her head slightly, she kissed the thick column of his neck. Shep had always, from the beginning, focused on her enjoyment first and

foremost. He had the control to wait on his own release, more intent on pleasing her. Nothing had changed. Nothing. The love swirling and roiling through her right now was bright, powerful, hopeful and she nuzzled against him, fully satisfied. And he knew it, his hand stilling on her lower back, simply holding her in his arms, cradling her fully against him as the sacred being she was to him. She could feel him absorbing her on every level. It was times like this, after the initial orgasm and the further climaxes to come, that Willow swore her and Shep shared mental telepathy between them. She could feel his thoughts, feel his emotions and she savored them now like the treasures they had always been to her.

“That,” she whispered, sliding her fingers along his jaw, “was incredible, Shep. We’re so good together... we always were...”

Shep caressed her damp shoulder, moving some of her thick red hair aside, finding the nape of her neck, sliding his fingers across that sensitive area of hers. “We were always good together. Nothing’s changed then or now, Angel.”

Nodding, barely able to think, much less talk, all Willow wanted to do right now was keep this wonderful connection with Shep. And, as if reading her mind, and maybe her heart, he felt so content with that. Never mind that he was probably, just below her with his erection waiting, needing to come just as badly as she had. Willow didn’t want him to suffer, so she forced herself out of the ethers where she floated and languished.

Slowly, she sat up, flattening her palms against his chest, barely opening her eyes, drowning in the turbulent, narrowed blue of his gaze. “Your turn, big guy,” and she smiled, watching his expression turn primal. Sliding easily against him, she leaned forward, allowing the tip of his erection to press hotly against her entrance. His expression changed, became feral and dominant, his hands cupping her cheeks, testing the tip of himself slowly in and out of her gateway, sensing how tight it was. Closing her eyes, she leaned down, whispering against his thinned mouth, knowing

he was feeling the incredible heat and pleasure that awaited him, “Take me... take me like you used to...”

Shep groaned as Willow drew him within her, fearless as always. He worried that it had been as a long time for her as it had been for him. No way was he going to hurt her. They’d gone through enough heartache without actual physical pain added on top. And she was tight. So tight that he knew she hadn’t had sex in a damn long time. The male pride part of himself gloried in that discovery. But it made him clamp down on his needs and focus his control as he continued to allow her to slide him in and out of her, a little at a time, slowly introducing himself to her, allowing her body time to respond and unfold more to him. The sensations were overwhelming; heat and lightning all woven together within him. More than anything he kept his hands gripped hard on her hips, guiding her, but not allowing her to plunge down upon him, stopping her from drawing him too sudden and deep within her out of fear of causing her discomfort. Shep controlled her movements with his strength. If she minded, she didn’t say anything. And he knew that Willow, if she didn’t like something, she’d let him know immediately. Relishing the soft, humming sounds coming out of her, he knew she was enjoying meeting him once more, appreciative of his slow reintroduction into her.

His heart flew open as he eased in a little more. He could feel her body stretching, accommodating and sometimes, like now, he’d hold Willow quiet, not allowing her to push down on him like she wanted to. Eyes closed, sweat running down his temples, his hands gripping her full, curved hips, his breathing was becoming ragged. Mouth tightening, he focused on control, not on his own pleasure. He guessed that Willow hadn’t had sex in over a year or more. Shep would never ask her about that, however. He felt that was for her to share with him if she wanted to. He could feel her frustration at being controlled by him and he smiled. Willow wasn’t one to wait too long, the impatient person that she was.

Allowing her to move, she immediately sucked him halfway up into her confines,

gripped by her wet, hot corrugated walls. The sensations made him groan and he could feel his balls tightening up against his body, their explosiveness building to a point he knew he wouldn't be able to control. And Willow felt it within herself, too. Some of his worry ebbed as he felt her body blooming like a flower to him, widening for his thick length, welcoming him deeper within, and he relaxed slightly. And then, she started to move back and forth, with each hip-thrust feeling his rock-hard shaft surging ever that little bit deeper into her, making him growl with satisfaction, with yearning. She was just as assertive as he was in bed, one of the many things Shep loved about Willow. Her fearlessness fed him and, as he loosened his hands more and more from her hips, giving her the freedom she wanted, his whole world exploded.

Just as she seated him as deeply as he could go within her fiery chamber, he felt an intense heat bolting down his spinal column, slamming through him, and the release into her made him groan. His hands gripped her hips harder, holding her against him, paralyzed by his explosive release into her welcoming confines. His mind melted. He heard her cry out, realizing she had just orgasmed once more, her fingertips digging deep into his chest. Helpless, caught and tumbling in the heat swirling through him, Shep couldn't move. And she couldn't either. In that delicious moment of culmination, they were fused into oneness, each experiencing a mind-blowing release. It was the most delicious experience that Shep had ever had with Willow. Maybe their three years apart had made their hearts grow fonder for one another. They'd sure as hell made loving her ten times better than before. And the 'before' had always been incredibly satisfying even back then. As he lay there beneath her, feeling her quiver, hearing those little cries of exultation tearing out of her, feeling her channel grip him over and over again as she orgasmed, all he could do was smile with gratitude.

His heart flew open as never before as he relaxed her hips from his tight grip. Swirling in heat, deep pleasure throbbing through him, Shep felt a love for Willow transcending even this incredible experience with her. He loved her with his life. He'd nearly given his life for her earlier today and would have willingly died to keep

her alive. She was precious to him. Her fearless nature, her in-your-face personality, just heightened the love he held for this warrior woman of his. And Willow was truly his again. Shep knew that she was, in this magical moment, more so than he'd ever felt before, and that realization made joy soar through him, so keen and glorious. Somehow, someday, they would walk the minefields of each other's pasts and find safe pathways through them together. Somehow...

CHAPTER 13

Sometime later, Shep drifted off to sleep, Willow at his side, pressed warmly against him. He remembered her nuzzling against his neck, kissing him, her arm draped across his damp torso. The tendrils of her hair were damp as well; a red carpet spread out across his chest. The scent of her hair, combined with her womanly fragrance, made him feel a peace that he'd never felt as deeply before. Being with Willow always allowed him to relax, but never to the depth he now slowly became aware of as the darkness of sleep quietly wrapped its wings around him.

It was dark when Shep slowly awakened much later. His first sensation was the warmth and womanly softness of Willow sleeping, still pressed against the length of his body. Even in sleep, they sought this closeness with one another. His arm was curved around her shoulders, holding her close to him. Marveling that they clung to one another, as if to life preservers, he slowly looked around the room. There was a nightlight out in the hall, spilling light in through the partially open bedroom door. She had left her iPod on out in the living room, and he could hear the quiet, instrumental music of a harp playing from its speakers. Shep knew she loved symphony music; loved harps, oboes and English horns. It wasn't his kind of music. He liked bluegrass and New Orleans jazz, but this music suited his mood right now.

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Looking up at the shadowy, white, nondescript ceiling, he allowed all his senses to open completely to Willow. He felt her warm, moist breath against his neck and upper chest. She was glued to him in the nicest of ways. Over their three years apart, she had grown even more slender than before. She was almost skinny, and that concerned him. But... look at himself: He'd lost his appetite after she'd left. Food had no longer held any enjoyment for him. Nothing had, as a matter of fact. There had been rare times, when they were both at Bagram, in the married unit, when one or the other could cook a meal for both of them. Shep had looked forward to those times; to be able to sit down and share a meal had been a rarity back then. He frowned as he considered for the nth time, that marrying as active combatants, especially in Afghanistan, had put the first nails in the coffin of their marriage. Its collapse wasn't just down to communication issues. It was also the many other stressful pressures on them at the time. They'd lived in a world of shock and trauma.

Moving his fingers gently up and down her warm, firm upper arm, he felt such a fierce love for Willow that he knew he could never adequately put into words. Maybe men were designed to show, not tell, how they felt? Willow would scoff at that notion, explode the lie that it was, just as she had in the past during their many heated conversations on the topic. She'd made it clear that God had given men a tongue and mouth to speak with, too. So, any excuse to the contrary was a moot point in her world, and she'd made it more than clear that he'd damned well better start communicating fully with her; emotions and all.

A faint, wistful smile hooked at the corners of his mouth as his mind ranged over so many faceted memories of their time together at Bagram. It had been a helluva two-and-a-half years together. Just as there'd been a war surrounding them, there'd also been a war of unending battles going on within their marriage, the reflections of their

outer and inner worlds combining and eventually tearing them apart. He had enough distance on their doomed marriage to realize that marrying and living in a combat zone was about as far from ideal as one could get. He wasn't willing to blame it all on that, however. He knew he had issues with communication and couldn't fault Willow on her need to talk deeper and more intimately with him. He'd had three years to chew on that, and eventually realize she'd been right. He'd only given a part of himself out of the bedroom, not all of him that she'd demanded and expected—until now.

Willow stirred, making a snuffling noise against his neck that turned his rueful half-smile into a full, honest grin. She moved one of her long, beautiful legs and he relished how soft she felt. How much he'd missed this! Missed her! Her fingers moved against his chest and then she brought them to her face, rubbing her eyes as she slowly rolled away from him to lay on her back. Releasing her, he eased himself up on his left side, one arm still beneath her neck, watching her awaken in the grayness of the bedroom. All the stress around her eyes that had clung there before, had now dissolved. Her hair was tousled, a red frame around her face. Willow was all woman, but she had the amazing ability to be childlike, too. He found it tough to be that way himself, but over the years together, she had helped him become more spontaneous. She drew out the little boy deeply closeted within his adult body. Shep watched as her thick, long red lashes slowly, slowly opened.

“Uhhh,” Willow groaned, “I feel like I fell off a cliff and died.”

He moved a few strands of her hair away from her temple. “Hopefully in a good way and not a bad one?” he teased, seeing how cloudy her shadowed eyes looked. Willow did not wake up quickly. She was one of those people that relied on strong coffee first thing, and then another hour or so afterward, to really be alert. Shep often wondered when she was on combat duty, asleep in the ready room and a call came in for her, how she was instantly able to leap up and get to her combat jet. Adrenaline, he supposed, his grin curving even higher as she puckered her lips, making more

snuffling sounds and rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. How much he loved her. How much he wanted this to work out for them this time around.

“Uhh, oh, always good. You know that Shep...,” and she yawned.

Chuckling, he continued to touch her lightly here and there, watching the pleasure come to her expression. She invited this kind of tender caresses. So sensitive. Shep wondered if that trait was connected to her red hair. Even though she was obviously a hardline go-getter, sensitivity-wise, she was off the chart. Exquisitely so. He’d never told her this, but as far as orgasms went, he’d never met a woman that could come as quickly and easily as she did. Her body was always super-susceptible to his touch. It didn’t take much to bring her over the top.

One day, he’d like to explore that with her; to find out what she thought about her vulnerability to his touch. That was communication, too, he reminded himself, so he wasn’t a complete loser when it came to that, even if it was of the non-verbal variety. Touch was another communication tool, and he felt a jolt of pleasure at that “aha!” moment of realization. He was beginning to grasp that all the questions and insights that swirled around in his mind had to be verbalized so that Willow could share in what he was thinking or feeling. If he didn’t open his mouth, she didn’t know. And she was right: he’d been cheating her out of that intimate bond she desperately needed between them. He got it now. He wouldn’t forget.

Leaning down, he rested his lips against the curly hair at her temple. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve loved watching you wake up, Willow. Every tiny expression in your face, those little noises you make when you’re waking up, they make me smile. They make me love you even more than I did before. Did you know that?” He was going to lay it all in front of her, his efforts to try and communicate wobbly at first. Her lashes opened quickly, and he held her stunned gaze. Had he said something WRONG? God, that’s what he lived in horror of doing: saying the wrong thing and hurting her feelings. Or otherwise screwing up again, as usual. And then, those full

lips of hers curved and she lifted her hand, grazing his jaw, holding his uncertain gaze.

“Wow, just wow,” she murmured, her eyes serious.

“What?” His heart fell with terror. He anxiously absorbed her expression, not understanding what she meant.

“That’s so beautiful,” she sighed, leaning up, kissing him softly. Laying down, snuggling against him, she added, “You’re a poet, Shep. You have such a beautiful way with words. And you hid all of that from me.”

Stunned, he lay there above her, staring at her, now put at a loss for words. “Really?” was all he could choke out. A poet? A poet!!! That would be the last word he’d ever use regarding himself!

Laughing a little, her voice drowsy, she said, “If this is the new Shep Porter, I really like him. I like that you are trying to talk and share with me what’s in your heart, what you are feeling right this very moment. Keep doing it. I love it. I love you...”

Her sincerity totaled him. Shock, sweet with its utter relief, rolled through Shep as he saw the love shining in Willow’s eyes only for him. “But all I did was tell you what was running through my mind.”

“Yes. See how easy it really is, Shep? You know I need to know what you’re thinking, how you’re feeling. And just now? Sharing your words with me is like giving me chocolate.”

He knew her intense love of chocolate. “What did you mean by ‘wow’?”

She slowly sat up, her hair tumbling around her shoulders, the ends nearly touching

her breasts. Wiping her eyes, she said, “That ‘wow’ meant that it made me feel so good to be a woman, to be with you. You’ve never given words like that to me before. And I loved it!” Her voice grew husky, and she reached out, cradling his jaw in her hand. “And I love you, Shep. I never stopped loving you.”

Capturing her hand in his, he held it against his heart. “I love you, too, Willow. I never stopped loving you, either. I thought I had, but that wasn’t true.” He grimaced. “I’m pretty good at lying and hiding the truth from myself.”

She laughed a little as she leaned forward, pressing her lips against his. “I was in denial too, Shep. And it only took nearly dying to get us to realize we’ve always loved one another, and that it was worth it to try one more time...”

Unable to stop from smiling, he absorbed her naked beauty, that wild, untamable red hair of hers, that glint of confidence in her eye, and that stunning body of hers. “You know, in the last three years? You’ve grown more beautiful, Angel,” and he reached out, stroking her arm, the tenderness reflected in her eyes. He found it crazy that what had always run through his mind, she loved hearing come out of his mouth, instead. It was that simple. Shep could see the profound and instant affect it’d had on upon Willow. Emboldened, reaching out, sliding his fingers through her silky hair, he added huskily, “There isn’t anything I don’t love about you. Things were always great when we were making love.”

Lids closing, she leaned into his hand as he gently massaged her scalp. “That’s true.” She opened her eyes again, staring into his own, as his hand moved to her shoulder. “Do you see now, just a little bit, what else I need from you, Shep? Can you imagine how much better we’ll get along now that you’ll put your words out there?”

“Yes, I get it. I understand now. I’m just sorry it took so long.” And he was. He’d be forever sorry for the three years they’d lost with one another because of it.

She leaned forward, resting her hand on his hard, flat belly. “Every time I tried to ask you about your family. You refused to go there. You would never talk about your mom or dad before.” She smoothed her hand across his flesh. “You started to the other day, but I feel like there was more. Could you share that with me, now? Because I really feel in my gut and in my heart that you closed up for a reason. And in my experience? It’s usually because of something terrible that happened in a person’s childhood.”

Shep felt his stomach clench even though Willow’s warm hand felt supportive. He saw the pleading in her eyes, heard the barely restrained feelings in her low voice. Placing his hand over hers, he rasped, “You’re right. Here goes the rest of it: the woman my father married, after the divorce was final... she was already pregnant with his child. He just... went away without explanation from my mother, without telling her WHY he left.”

“Do you want to talk about what you and your mom went through?”

Now that the first part was out of him, it didn’t seem as important to hide the rest; to hide the past he’d always been so ashamed of. The tenderness in Willow’s expression made it easier for him to go on, “It was terrible, Willow. At the time, at my age, I couldn’t put it into words or perspective. My father bought a house on the other side of town, married that woman, and that was his new life. I rarely saw him. My mother’s reaction was severe, but I didn’t see it then at nine years old. I thought it was common that anyone who was in her place would withdraw from everything. On some nights, I’d hear her sobbing in her bedroom, and I felt guilty for not being able to help her to stop crying. Now? As an adult, I realize she was crying for the loss of my father. She’d never talk about it to me or anyone. I was just a kid, and I was confused, scared and lonely. I loved my mother very much, but she retreated from everyone and everything.”

Willow withdrew her hand from his, caressing his jaw. “Your mother never climbed

out of that shock to take care of you after that?”

“What do you mean?”

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“Was she able to love you? Hug you? Be there when you needed someone to talk to?”

Shep rested his forearm across his brow, looking off into the darkness. “No. Like I said, she just dried up, died inside, and went away. Now, looking back on it, my mom was in deep, severe depression. Eventually, she went back to illustrating books. She kept me fed and clothed, but I felt like I was living with a ghost in that house.”

“So, you had no one to talk to about how you felt at all?”

“No. I was ashamed of my mother’s depression, although at that time, I didn’t know what it was called. I only saw the symptoms of it every day; I thought everyone who had that experience would behave like that.”

“Not to mention the trauma of your father leaving, too.”

His mouth tightened. “He had a new life, Willow. A new wife. A new son.” He looked over at her sad face. “I guess he was happy, but I don’t know that for sure. I know my mom and I weren’t. I missed him so much...”

“I see why you closed up,” she said gently. “In a sense, you were abandoned by both your parents in different ways. You grew up never sharing how you felt with anyone because no one was there to ask you questions or care for how you were feeling about all of it.”

Shrugging, he said, “It was just the way it was.” He reached out, capturing her hand resting on her crossed knees. “I got a different slant on it when you walked out on me. I understood the pain of what my mother went through.”

Rubbing her brow, giving him a look of apology, she whispered, "I'm so sorry, Shep. I felt so strongly that something wounded you in your childhood, and that's why you couldn't bridge the gap with me. But you never told me." She curled her fingers around his hand. "Until now... This all makes sense to me now." She released his hand and lay down beside him. She curved one arm around his torso, her head resting on his shoulder. "Now I see why you didn't understand what I needed from you."

He caressed her unruly hair. "I cheated you. I cheated us. I was behaving exactly like my mother. It took me three years of wandering the wilderness of Peru to get what you were talking about, what you needed from me, Willow." He sighed raggedly. "No one is sorrier than me for the pain I caused you or the pain I caused myself."

Shaking her head, Willow tightened her arm around his middle. "Don't apologize. You were raised to be silent on all levels of yourself, Shep." She pulled back, holding his murky, regretful gaze. "You were in a circumstance not of your own making. You were only nine, so young and vulnerable. It tells me why you were afraid to be equally vulnerable with me."

"I thought I was open to you, Willow. Especially when we loved one another." It sent his heart aching to think that she'd thought he was that much like his mother: completely and emotionally unavailable. Shep knew the coldness of the shield his mother bore after the divorce. He could never get inside it to touch her like he had before. "I mean, I hated that my mother was closed up and I couldn't ever get through to her again. I didn't want to be like her. I tried to be open with you. And I failed."

"No, you weren't completely unavailable, Shep. You were open when we loved one another," she soothed. "I fell in love with the man who made love to me so exquisitely. I wanted THAT MAN twenty-four hours a day," and she searched his eyes. "Not for an hour at a time."

It all fell into place for Shep in a blinding instant. Shellshocked for a moment, he

digested her impassioned plea. He pushed himself up on his elbow, facing her, caressing her shoulder. “The good news is you are changing that,” she concluded.

Absorbing her words, hearing the hopefulness in them, he nodded. “Okay, I’m going to become that for you, Willow. It’s not going to be easy, but I’ll try every day. Hmmm... Something just occurred to me,” he rasped.

“What?”

“My mother’s drawings, the books she illustrated. She went on to keep doing them for the publishers and... whenever she was painting? She seemed fully absorbed into her creativity. Sometimes, I remember as a teen, I’d come home from school, and she’d be humming as she worked. I always thought she was happy then.” He grimaced. “Well, as happy as she could be.”

“Her creativity gave her some of what she lost when your father left you,” Willow murmured. “She was happy when she was painting, and I’m so glad she had that positive outlet. I’ll bet her depression lifted when she was doing that?”

“She was always lighter, more responsive toward me,” Shep said, nodding. He rubbed his face. “I didn’t put that together until just now.”

“Well,” she laughed a little, “you know how self-absorbed teenagers are, right? You wouldn’t have recognized it then, but I’ll bet you do now.”

Nodding, he said, “Yeah, I can totally relate to that.”

“At least your mother got some happiness out of her life,” Willow whispered, giving him a warm look.

Shep grew quiet and frowned. “You need to know the rest of my family story,

Willow. When I was leaving for college, my mother suddenly died of a heart attack.”

Gasping, she sat up. “Oh, no!”

“Yeah,” he muttered, holding her wide-eyed gaze. “I was getting ready to put my bags in my car. Mom wasn’t around and I called for her. I found her laying on the bed, and I couldn’t rouse her. I called 911, but by the time the EMTs got there? She was dead. In fact, the medical examiner told me she had died hours before and there was no way to resuscitate her. I went into shock.”

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she whispered, “I’m so sorry, Shep... so sorry...”

“I called my dad and told him.” His voice lowered in pain. “He cried, and so did I.” The moments lulled between them and finally, he forced out, “Her funeral was three days later, and he came... he stood next to me. I was crying and couldn’t stop. He put his arm around me, hugged me, and we cried together.”

“Thank goodness he was there, and he held you,” she whispered, closing her eyes tightly.

Shep inhaled deeply and released it. “I have a lot of mixed feelings toward him to this day. I haven’t worked through all of it. I don’t know if I ever will. Or how I feel about him; what he did to my mother...”

“Things like this takes decades to resolve, if at all. Are you in touch with him now?”

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He shook his head. “No. After the funeral, he left and that’s the last I heard from him. That’s the way he wanted it, I guess.”

“What did you want?” and she squeezed him hard, her heart swelling to bursting point over the great losses in his childhood.

“I didn’t honestly know, Willow. I hoped someday that I would.”

She sighed, released him, and came around, kneeling in front of him and giving him a tremulous smile. “As tragic as this is for you. You’ve shared it all with me. This is the man I love so much, who lets those shields down and we share,” Tears spilled from her eyes. “You are the man I need. That I love.”

Willow’s tears tore him up inside. Her eyes were such a special color, a translucent, sunlit yellow green, always reminding him of the gemstone, peridot. Her tears only made that color even more breathtaking to him. He gathered her up against him, her tears falling on his chest as he stroked her hair. “You’ll have that man, Angel,” he rasped. “I promise...” He felt her barely nod, her arms going around him, holding him tightly as if he might suddenly disappear on her. He pressed small kisses across her hair, her temple, holding her tightly. Rocking her a little, like he might a crying child, he closed his eyes, pressing his jaw against her head, hurting for the both of them. His heart opened, blossoming in his chest, as she cried unashamedly in his arms, trusting him fully with herself for the first time. That moment was unexpected treasure and he held her and understood the enormity of the gift she’d just given him. Finally, each trusted the other. And he was going to continue to show her he was the man, outside and in, that she’d never stopped loving.

Willow sniffed, and slowly sat up. Shep reached over to the bedstand, pulled several tissues from a box, and handed them to her. She said a “thank you,” that came out muffled, as she wiped her eyes and blew her nose several times. Shep sat up, leaning back against the headboard, his thick, muscular legs on either side of her hips, drawing her up against the front of him. It was such a tender gesture on his part, and her eyes welled up with tears once more. She leaned back against him, his arms around her waist, holding her gently, allowing her this time to weep away three years of loss, hurt and grief. She rested her cheek on his shoulder, her brow against his jaw. He enclosed her with his body, as if to protect her, and never had she felt more loved than right then. Sniffing, she kept wiping her nose. The tears still dribbled down her cheeks, plopping on his taut chest.

“Maybe,” he rasped, placing several small kisses along her hairline, “you had three years’ worth of tears built up?”

Managing a choked laugh, she nodded. “Three years. Yes.” She’d cried buckets after leaving him. And the tears would come out of nowhere. Whether she was flying or on the ground, it didn’t matter. These tears were different though. They were just as much about the losses in Shep’s life, as well as her own. She leaned forward, placing a kiss against his neck. “Thank you for opening the faucet.” She heard a rumble in his chest and knew it was all right. Shep didn’t try to make her stop crying. She shared her tears, and he held her, silently respecting her need to release them.

There was so much good in him, and now, she knew the full truth of his wounding. He was still deeply hurting.

As she wiped her eyes, sniffed, closed them, her hand holding the damp tissue against his chest, Shep held her, to start giving back some of what she had lost of him. It made more tears come. There had been such loss between them over those barren, lonely years. No wonder her needs hadn’t been met. He hadn’t known HOW to meet them. That totaled her all over again and she turned, snuggling up against him,

feeling his arms around her, needing to be as close as she could to him. Now, she felt guilty over her demands on him. He'd been doing the best he could, he loved her, but there'd been such a huge disconnect between them. Now? They BOTH understood it. They were older, more mature.

"I-I'm sorry I pushed you so hard to change in our marriage," she whispered brokenly, moving her hand to his shoulder. "If I'd only known, Shep, we could have maybe done this differently, saved our marriage."

Shep eased the sodden tissues from her hand and replaced them with fresh ones. Moving his thumb across her damp cheek, he replied softly, "We both made mistakes, but most of the major ones were on my side of the ledger." His mouth tightened, a dam on a torrent of emotions that could wait for slow release later.

She took his hand, kissing the back of it, bringing it between her breasts. "That's the past. I'm far more focused on what we can do together, both now and in the future. Aren't you?" Willow saw the anguish, the love, and the worry in his expression as he remained silent. Knowing he was thinking his methodical way through all this, she was content to give him the time to digest everything. On important issues, Shep always went inside his brilliant mind, looking at them from all angles, before getting back to her. The times he had gotten back to her, that is.

He eased his hand out of hers, cupping her cheek. "What kind of future do you want with me?"

She sighed. "I want to live with you, Shep. I want us to try again. I have NO idea where it will lead, but I'm willing to try. Are you?" She felt the roughness of his fingers as he caressed her face, temple to jaw, saw the burning need for her in his narrowing eyes as he studied her. The silence cloaked them, and it felt familiar and comforting to her. She was learning with Shep, not to goad an answer out of him. He was a tortoise, and she was a roadrunner. It was her turn to make some changes.

“What I want? I want you in my life again, Willow. In any way that you want to share it with me. No ultimatums. No rules. Just whatever moves your heart when it comes to me, to us. For my part? I’d like nothing better than for us to move into one of these condos together. I know I have a lot to make up for. I’m scared as hell because I’m going to stumble and fall many, many times as I try to open up to you, try to be present in the ways you need me to be.” He frowned, stroking her hair. “I’ll take whatever you want to give me, Willow. I going to fight to get you back, and I’ll prove it an hour, a day at a time with you. How does that sound?”

“Better than good,” her voice wobbled, tears gathering in her eyes. “I never thought,” and she hesitated, swamped with emotions.

“What?”

His concern was touching as he kissed her wrinkled brow. “I never thought this could ever happen. It’s a miracle in itself, Shep. Don’t you feel the same way?”

Nodding, he said, “Yeah. Honestly? I feel like I’m in one of my weekly dreams where we get back together and live happily ever after.” He managed a shy little-boy grin. “I’ve had dreams at least once a week about us since you left me. They were always good ones, positive and hopeful.” His grin deepened. “And sometimes, the dream turned pretty hot.”

She saw his cheeks turn ruddy and she loved him fiercely, returning his bashful look. Euphoria flowed powerfully through her. “Can I tell you how many hot dreams I had of us after I left? So many I’ve lost count over the years, Shep.” Shaking her head, she laughed. “Aren’t we a pair?”

“Yeah,” he rumbled, kissing her temple, “I guess we are. Is there hope for us, Willow?”

She sobered. “I believe there is. Or I wouldn’t be here in your arms, in this bed.”

“That pretty much seals it, then,” he said, moving her such that he could look her directly in the eyes. “If we’re agreeing to live with one another? What with the security issues we’ve got presently? Our lives are on the line. I worry about that. I worry for you. And before you protest? I know you can take care of yourself. You proved it yesterday in spades. But we have to look at the present as well as our future, Willow.”

She heard the seriousness in his tone, saw the worry in his expression. Feeling his fierce protectiveness, she moved her hand down his arm wrapped around her waist and small of her back. “Look, I know this is dangerous now. But I’m not stopping flying or delivering goods to your worksite or the other charities in the region, Shep. I’m not going to let that bastard stop me from living my life the way I want.”

He grimaced.

“Well?” She arched her eyebrows, her voice turning adamant, “You think I’m going to cut and run? That’s not my style. I’ll grant I’m not a ground pounder trained like you, but I can learn to be. I’m staying, that’s all there is to it, Shep. So, if you have an argument ready to try and make me leave and be safe Stateside? It isn’t gonna fly. At all. That thought has just crashed and burned.”

Unhappy, he grimaced. “I knew you’d say something along those lines.”

Snorting, she muttered, “I don’t run when things get dicey, Shep. You ought to know that better than anyone.”

“Yeah, I do.” He caressed her shoulder, trying to smooth the tension out of her, knowing he’d ruffled her composure.

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“I don’t know what Luke will say when we tell him we’re going to start living together. Also, he has to report all this to Artemis. I’m sure Tal Culver and her mission planners will have protocols to put into place to protect us while we’re here.” she said.

“I’m sure Luke’s on the phone constantly with Wyatt Lockwood about this attack. And Dev is in just as much danger as you are. You’re both flying a plane constantly in and out of this airport. There’s so many things David and his soldiers, if they escape, can sneak in and do to you. I’m sure Artemis will come up with a plan of some sort.”

“Then?” she pleaded, “Give them a chance to talk to us about their ideas? Dev is involved in this, too. She’s an American woman. They could target her just as much as me. Let’s give Artemis a chance to digest the fluid situation and then see what they want us to do?”

Kissing her brow, he said, “That works for me.”

Willow poked him in the chest with her index finger growling, “And, just to be doubly clear: don’t EVER backtrack to the idea that I’m leaving Ethiopia for the States, Shep. That will not fly one inch off the ground with me.”

“Read you loud and clear, Angel.”

She saw how unhappy he was, but Willow had never run from a fight. She’d always run TOWARD it. That was her nature, to engage the enemy, not be driven off by it. She acknowledged her air-war experience did not translate to ground-war tactics.

She'd seen that all too up close and personal yesterday when they'd been attacked. "If it hadn't been for your experience," she admitted to him, "I'm sure I wouldn't have survived."

He kissed her cheek and whispered, "Well, I was there, Willow. It wasn't our day to die." He studied her expression. "I know you're worried. Anyone in their right mind would be. If David is that daring, that cunning, he'll make another attempt on you or Dev. Or both of you. I'm sure Luke will sort this out with Artemis. Wyatt's a brilliant tactician and he'll most likely come up with some fixes that will keep you safer." He scowled. "But you'll never be completely safe here, Willow, and neither will Dev. You'll always be targets to David and his men so long as you remain here. You hear me?"

"Loud and clear," she admitted. "I've never been stalked on the ground. Well, I should take that back. Bagram was mostly safe, but from time to time, the Taliban would throw a mortar or an RPG over the fence at us. The fixed-wing terminal sat in the middle of that huge base, though, so we never got mortared. I felt very safe taking off with a load under my wings. I never worried about getting shot out of the sky. It's true, we took evasive landing patterns to avoid such a possibility, but in all the years I flew in and out of there, my F-16 never had a single bullet hole in it."

"And that's why we need to get you and Dev up to speed on firearms training and other tactics a ground pounder would automatically employ if he or she were assaulted by an enemy force."

"I'm prepared to undertake that kind of training and I know Dev is too, Shep. We're staying put."

"Hey," he teased, lightening the tension, "think of it this way? We just agreed to get back together and take another run at living with one another, right? Why would I wanna give up that sweet honeypot by chasing you off?"

She punched him playfully in the arm and he feigned a wince.

CHAPTER 14

Willow was cleaning up from an early breakfast at six a.m., when there was a knock at the door. Shep scowled, tensed, and got up.

“From now on?” he said, “Never open that door until you’ve looked out the peephole. I’ll get it.”

Her heart thumped once in her chest as she finished putting the dirty dishes into the dishwasher. Shep was in his body-fitting dark green t-shirt, jeans and was barefoot. Ordinarily, she would find that a cute picture of him, but not this morning. Not after their talk earlier; he looked boyish but now she knew what he had gone through as a boy, and the images were still too clear in her head.

“It’s Luke and Dev,” he called, opening the door.

Willow walked into the living room. Dev looked pale, dark shadows beneath her eyes, her hair tousled. Luke looked exhausted, too, but there was a grim determination in his expression. “Hey, come on in,” she invited. “I just made a fresh pot of coffee. Would you two like some?” Because they both looked like they needed it. Dev was dressed in her usual casual look of a feminine pink short-sleeved blouse and twill cargo pants matching her sandals. Luke was dressed similarly to Shep, but he had combat boots on and she saw the drop holster he wore without a jacket to hide it.

“Coffee would be great,” Dev said. She came over, giving Willow a hug. “You look better. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Willow said, releasing her. She looked up as Luke came over to her.

“Coffee for you too?”

“Please,” Luke said.

Shep shut and locked the door. “Let’s go to the kitchen table,” he suggested, gesturing in that direction.

Willow picked up a lot of tension between Dev and Luke. Neither looked happy. Both looked stressed to the max. She didn’t know what was going on. As they sat down, she went to the counter. Shep joined her, pulling down four clean mugs. She poured coffee into them. He picked up two and she took the other two.

“Have you heard what’s happened to David and his soldiers?” she asked Luke, setting the coffee in front of him. He nodded his thanks to her.

“That’s in part why I’m here,” he told them as they sat down.

Willow sat at the other end, facing Luke. “What’s been going on?”

“Shep called me yesterday afternoon while you were in the shower and told me that you were going to get cleaned up and hit the sack. I didn’t want to disturb you, so I waited until this morning to speak with you,” he said.

“Okay,” Willow murmured, “what’s been happening?”

“Yesterday afternoon, General Hakym sent out a squad of eight men in a Black Hawk helicopter equipped with infrared. They located the ten tangos right near the river. They landed in a nearby meadow and promptly engaged David’s group. The good news is that five of the bastards are dead and the other four are in custody and being interrogated right now. The bad news is that Tefere David escaped, and I’m damned unhappy about that development. If they could have caught him, we’d be on a lot

more stable footing.”

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Willow saw the grimness in Luke's gray eyes. "What does THAT mean?"

Luke gave Shep and her a warning glance. "I've been in constant touch with Tal Culver at Artemis over this attack on the two of you. Wyatt Lockwood, her husband, and the Mission Planning department head are all over this. They are having a meeting tomorrow morning, their time, to make some final decisions that are being considered."

Willow looked over at Dev, who had her hands around her cup, looking equally unhappy as Luke. "What final decisions, Luke?"

"Tal wants to take you and Dev out of Ethiopia," he said.

Willow clamped down on a retort, waiting, because she knew Luke would give them more intel. She saw Shep give her a glance. She knew he still wanted her and Dev out of the country, despite her repeated insistences to him that they stay. Her fingers gripped the mug a little more tightly. Impatience ate at her, but she sat on it.

Luke lifted a shoulder. "Wyatt thinks you should stay in Ethiopia doing what you've been doing. He's got his group working on a secure way of keeping you safe as you fly the region, if you want to stay here." His mouth thinned. "But he knows, like I do, there is no such thing as safe when a terrorist group targets you."

"Yeah, well I'm staying," Willow told him.

"So am I," Dev muttered, giving Luke an angry glance.

Willow saw Luke's scowl deepen. Obviously, there had been some kind of argument between these two, because she felt she could almost cut the air between them with a knife. They certainly weren't on friendly ground with one another, that was clear. "So, they'll convene and make their final decision tomorrow?" she demanded.

Luke nodded. "Yes. The general's people, the ones interrogating the captured soldiers, are getting a lot of information out of them. He's sending the info directly to Artemis. Whatever they find out from these soldiers, will factor into whatever decision Tal Culver eventually makes," Luke told her. "Right now, everything's up in the air. My task is to keep you two safe. I've got two of my people out at the airport, keeping your Otter secure so that no one can sneak into the Delos hangar and plant a bomb in it, or try to destroy it, or whatever."

Wiping her face, Willow uttered, "This sucks. Big time." She dropped her hand, staring at Luke and then Shep. "I've got to think that David is after more than just us two."

"We'll know more about that, I hope, after Hakym's men get done with those four soldiers," Luke said wearily, finishing off his cup of coffee.

Shep got up, bringing over the pot and refilling everyone's mugs. "Do you think that David will back off after being attacked by the army?"

"Don't know. I'm not that familiar with him and his tactics, but Wyatt has his African consultant, Cav Jordan, on this. They're gathering every scrap of intel they can on Tefere David from every major top-secret source. The NSA, CIA and other military departments, are sending everything they have on this dude. We'll have a better picture of how he engages with his enemies by tomorrow, I would hope."

"So?" Willow said, "All of this factors into Tal's final decision regarding us?"

“Yes. To be frank about it, Willow, I think you and Dev need to be removed from this country immediately. Tal is supporting replacing both of you with two male pilots to take over your priorities with the charities, as well as helping with the ongoing construction work.”

Willow glared at him. “That is NOT gonna happen. Not in a million years.”

Luke sighed and avoided the sharpened, angry look shot at him. “Listen, I have NO authority in this decision. I was asked my opinion. It will be factored into a lot of other information we’re not privy to back at Artemis.”

“Crap,” Willow muttered, giving Dev a searching look.

“I’m right there with you,” Dev growled. “That little shit, Tefere David, isn’t going to scare me off from what I love to do. We’re a damned good flight team, Willow. We know our business. I told Luke earlier that we could be brushed up on our shooting skills, take more security precautions, and still be able to fly for Delos.”

“No kidding,” Willow said, meeting and holding Luke’s gray stare. “You aren’t dealing with two civilian women. We’re both military and we’ve seen combat. I grant it was in the air and not on the ground.” Willow gestured toward Shep. “I told him earlier that you could bring us up to the level needed to handle a pistol, and also how to be more security conscious as we went about our duties.”

Nodding, Luke said, “I grant that. And I know Wyatt’s leaning toward allowing the two of you to stay precisely because of your military backgrounds. I’ll be more than happy to get both of you to a shooting range, and work with you on upgrading your skills. That’s the easy part of the puzzle. I feel strongly that one of my security teams should be with you when you fly at all times. I’m going to keep a permanent sentry post on the Delos hangar and your plane. Wyatt’s sending over another ten security contractors to join us, and they’ll be under my command. We can do this. But it keeps

you two at risk if David is determined to go after one or both of you.”

Willow could feel Shep’s reaction. He was worried for her. He was a male, and all males worth their salt were protective as hell of those they loved. It was just part of their makeup. She gave Shep a tender look. “Want to fill them in on our latest news?”

He nodded. “Yeah, some good news, for once.” He turned, giving Luke and Dev a very shortened version of their decision to live together, to try and get back together once more.

Willow heard Dev gasp as she placed her hands against her mouth, tears of joy in her eyes. She grinned over at her best friend, giving her a thumbs up. Dev dropped her hands, wiped her eyes, smiling with her. Willow glanced toward Luke. He didn’t seem moved one way or another by the news, and she’d expected that. She was sure that Luke knew they had been married and divorced, but this latest news probably didn’t factor, at all, into his security concerns.

“So, that’s the plan?” Luke asked. “Here? In this condo, then?”

“Yes,” Shep said. “Today I’m going to move my few clothes and other things up here to Willow’s home.”

“Okay,” Luke said, “that’s good. It is better under the circumstances because you’re an extra layer of protection for Willow, Shep.”

“That crossed my mind,” he said.

Willow looked to Dev. “What about you? You’re alone in that condo.”

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Dev glared at Luke and then turned her attention back to Willow. “Not anymore. Luke has insisted that he take the second bedroom of my condo and stay with me from now on until this thing is resolved. I didn’t want it,” she bit out, “but he told me that’s the way it’s gonna be for now.”

Luke gave her an apologetic look. “It’s only temporary,” he told Dev.

Willow could feel the edgy anger bubbling up in Dev. She knew of her friend’s choice to not have anything to do with a man. She was sure that Luke pushing himself onto her turf, into her home, was chaffing her friend raw. No wonder she was looking angry and upset. Now, Willow knew why. Luke seemed deeply affected by her reaction to him and his decision. He couldn’t possibly know why Dev was reacting like that toward him, know about her terrible childhood. It wasn’t personal. She was that way with all men: Not wanting to be touched by them, approached by them, or have them in any close vicinity to herself except in a professional capacity. Plus, Willow was sure that, while Luke knew some of Dev’s background, there was no way he knew ALL of it. And in her case, the devil was in the sordid, heart-wrenching details. She couldn’t imagine Dev’s emotions right now, having a strange man living in her condo with her. Willow hoped she’d get a chance later to talk with Dev because she looked miserable about the situation.

Willow knew that Shep was a day behind on his current construction project due to the near kidnapping. He’d called in by sat phone to his second-in-command, an Ethiopian civil engineer, and gotten a status report on the ongoing creation of security measures at Addis Zemen. She was relieved for him that work was continuing on

schedule, without any delay. After the call, just like that, Shep moved in with her. Not that he had much to move in with. Her condo had two bedrooms, and he put his few belongings in the spare one. There was a comfort in having him in her condo. It wasn't putting her in an untenable situation, unlike Dev's.

She felt sorry for Dev. She just couldn't trust men. And, even though Luke was someone she could totally rely on, her past experiences got in the way of her seeing him as a protector instead of a perpetrator. She viewed him through the same dark lens that she'd seen every man through since escaping abuse at the hands of a male family member. Willow wished Dev could somehow overcome those awful experiences and get into a wonderful, loving relationship with the right man. Right now, Dev was angry and defensive toward Luke. He tolerated it, and Willow saw that he was gentle and sensitive toward her friend's needs as much as he could be under these stressful circumstances. That was good because Dev hated big, bruising, egotistical males. Those were of the sort that had hurt her so badly as a child. She couldn't handle being around that kind of man. Thankfully, Luke was quiet, intelligent, super-susceptible toward her moods, and Willow felt that, over the next few days, Dev would settle down and grudgingly accept him temporarily as part of her life.

Willow wanted to get out of the condo and fly. Despite her newfound feeling of coziness with Shep, being cooped up here was driving HER crazy. Shep was on the phone constantly with his assistant in Addis Zemen, always busy at the kitchen table scattered with legal pads, pens, and his ever-open laptop, engaged and focused. Luke had promised he'd give them an update tonight and that couldn't come too soon. Being grounded frustrated her as little else could. She lived to be in the air, and each moment away from the cockpit grated on her every nerve. Willow was sure Dev felt the same.

Luke sat with everyone at Shep and Willow's kitchen table. It'd been going on ten p.m. when he'd knocked on their condo door. Dev had come with him, albeit at a

distance. Willow wasn't happy to see Dev take a seat on the opposite side of the table from Luke. It was apparent that she didn't want to be anywhere near him. And Dev's mood hadn't improved at all. Willow's heart ached for her good friend. No one needed this kind of ongoing stress.

Luke opened his tablet. "According to the interrogation completed by General Hakym's unit, the four prisoners were more than forthcoming. They were child soldiers under David's command in the Darfur region of the Sudan for many years. Hakym's men were taught interrogation techniques by U.S. Intelligence; they befriended them, gave them food, something to drink, cigarettes, and then just listened. These four men had been terrified that they were going to be shot by the Ethiopian Army on the spot. It was easy for the unit to bargain with them for intel."

"But they're going to prison?" Willow demanded.

"Yes, military tribunal will decide their fate. It's out of our hands. They're off the street, so to speak, and will hopefully never be able to rejoin David or any other terrorist group."

"Good to know," Shep agreed, sitting across from Willow at the table. "What's the bottom line, Luke?"

"That David was after either Dev or Willow. He wanted a female American captive to give to his warlord in Somalia: a certain Cunar Hanad. David is very tight with Hanad, apparently. The capture of Willow yesterday, had it been successful, would have taken her into Somalia. She would have been dragged before Hanad and gifted to him by David. This is David's way of showing how important he is to the terrorist organization Hanad runs. Everyone in it, apparently, is seeking out an American woman to capture. But it goes deeper than that," and he frowned, scrolling the screen with his finger. "It doesn't even matter which terrorist organization it is. They are all targeting American women."

“So, they’re after something new to shock the world with,” Willow added. “Because these assholes have already beheaded American and European men lending aid to the Syrian people over in the Middle East.”

Nodding, Luke said, “Yes. But even years before that? An Irish woman who ran a charity in Afghanistan was captured and murdered by terrorists over there. But it wasn’t on video. Now, according to our prisoners, there’s a powerful push across the Middle East to capture a white American woman. That’s their best-case scenario, for obvious reasons, but the order has gone out that a European woman will do, too. But an American is preferred.”

Dev growled, “What? So, they can behead one of us on video and then spray it all over the internet?”

Luke grimaced and nodded. “Afraid so.”

“It will happen,” Shep said quietly. “It’s only a matter of time. There’s too many American women reporters in and around Syria. One of them could be easily captured.”

“God, I hope not,” Willow said. She searched Luke’s unreadable features, but she could see he had his game face in place. “So, David was trying to stand out in the terrorist packs by capturing me?”

“Yes, that’s what General Hakym thinks. Wyatt Lockwood has received all the interrogation intel via encrypted email. His people are pouring over everything. I talked to the general about an hour ago and he feels that David, being the violent upstart that he is, was trying to impress his warlord boss.”

“Again, what’s the bottom line?” Shep prodded Luke.

“Consensus at the moment is that this was an anomaly, Shep. That David did this on his own. These soldiers have been with him since age nine out in Darfur. They know him pretty well. There’s no known order from Hanad to David to capture Willow or Dev. He’s a loose cannon in their organization and often does unexpected things. Sometimes, they work out in his favor, and sometimes, not. In this case: not. He failed.”

“Okay,” Willow said, “will any of this make Artemis keep us here on the job then?” That’s all she cared about.

Luke pushed his fingers through his military-short blond hair, giving Dev and her an unsure look. “Based upon what I’ve seen of the interrogation? And talking to the general? I would think that Tal Culver MIGHT change her mind and allow both of you to remain here.”

Willow’s shoulders dropped, the tension bleeding out of her. She saw Dev look relieved. “Was that your final recommendation to Wyatt, then?” she pressed.

“Yes,” he admitted, hesitant. “They’re still gathering data on David and his attacks around Ethiopia. Until all that’s in, I’m not sure what Artemis, or Tal Culver will decide. But my opinion and belief is you can stay, fly and continue on mostly as you were before.” He held up his hand, frowning. “But that means you two get really good on the firing range with a pistol until it’s muscle memory. It means you are shadowed by at least one Artemis security person from the minute you leave this condo, go to the airport, fly to your destination, land back at Bahir Dar, and drive back to your condo. You can no longer NOT have a bodyguard.’

“I can live with that,” Dev growled defensively at Luke. She twisted her head, pinning Willow with a glare. “How about you?”

“Yeah, I’m fine with the extra layer of security. That’s not a problem.”

“Good,” Luke said with a sigh. “All of this intel is with Artemis. Tomorrow, sometime, they’ll call me, and I’ll let you know their final decisions.” He looked at his watch. “It’s a seven-hour difference between us and Artemis, in Alexandria, Virginia. I expect we’ll hear from Wyatt around six p.m. tomorrow night, eleven a.m. their time, same day.”

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Willow could hardly sit still when Luke and Dev arrived at seven p.m. the next evening. He had his tablet with him. She seemed happier. Could that mean good news? They all sat down at the kitchen table.

Luke said, "You two are staying here."

Giving a whoop, Willow grinned and clapped her hands. Dev grinned too, relieved.

"That's great!" Willow said. "What else?"

"Like we talked about earlier," Luke said. "You'll have an Artemis security person permanently assigned to you while you fly. Due to the fact you're living with Shep, Wyatt thinks you don't need an extra security person around at home."

"Good," Willow said, giving Shep a warm look. She reached out, squeezing his hand. He winked at her. Releasing his hand, she asked, "What about Dev's situation?"

Luke moved uncomfortably in his chair, giving her a quick glance. "There's a consensus of agreement at Artemis concerning that for now: I'm to remain her security, to keep using that second bedroom for a while longer."

Willow saw Dev wrinkle her nose, and avoid Luke's apologetic look, her hands clasped tightly on the table. If she hadn't been trying to mend her relationship with Shep, Dev could have easily come to live in this condo with her, thereby avoiding having to have a strange male underfoot. But that wasn't going to happen. "Dev? How are you feeling about this?"

“Not happy,” she grumped.

“Yeah, I understand,” Willow said gently. Luke looked as miserable as she did. She felt sorry for them. “But this is temporary, Dev. It’s better to have a bodyguard right now. We don’t know what else David and his soldiers might try and pull.”

“Well,” Luke said, rolling his shoulders to rid them of tension, “we’ve got a growing profile on him and his movements now, thanks to the intelligence community coming through for us.” He scrolled on his tablet for a moment. “He’s known to have roughly five hundred soldiers. All child soldiers he collected in Darfur ten years ago. They are loyal to him. And they’re killers. He’s an opportunist, a rogue agent. Someone who is hard to pin down strategically.”

“A loose cannon,” Dev suggested.

Luke glowed with an over-exaggerated look of praise cast in her direction. “Exactly.”

“So?” Willow said, opening her hands, “where does that put Dev and I?”

“On guard,” Luke said. “The extra contingent of Artemis operators will be landing later today at the Bahir Dar airport. I’ve got my second-in-command taking care of the logistics on them. My job is to be with Dev at her condo. When she’s flying with you, Willow? There will be another Artemis operator who will be always with you on the ground and in the air. When you’re done with a day’s worth of flying? Shep will be with you at your condo, and I’ll be at Dev’s. There are going to be times when Shep has to leave and go to the villages. When that happens? I’ll assign a security guard to you. I have a female security guard who will replace him when necessary. Wyatt feels that, because David is a rogue threat, he could pop up into our lives at any time without warning, so this is the way it’s going down.”

“Willow?” Dev said, “I talked to Wyatt after he’d finished briefing Luke on our

situation. He gave me the opportunity to be transferred out when I bitched about Luke living in my condo. I told him no, because you and I are a damn good team, and I don't want to break up what we've established here in Ethiopia."

"Good," Willow said, "because I'd hate to lose you as my copilot." She knew the extraordinary courage it took for Dev to stay, what with Luke now constantly in her life for the time being. It had to rub her raw in so many ways. "But you know? If it was better for you? I'd say get transferred. I know you prefer to live alone." She saw Luke frown, questions in his gray eyes over her statement. Willow had no idea how much or how little Dev was speaking to him. She was a totally private person and never spoke about what she'd gone through to anyone. Especially a man. It had taken them almost a year of flying together for Dev to finally entrust her with the horror of her childhood. There was no way she'd open up to Luke to explain why she didn't want him underfoot. He was a nice guy from what she could discern, and she could see him struggling to not be another load on Dev's shoulders. But he was, even though it wasn't his fault. Willow felt badly for Luke. She could feel him casting around to not upset Dev.

Shep drew Willow against him after they made love that night. Both were damp, breathing raggedly, fulfilled and happy. He gathered her into his arms, keeping her against his body, feeling her warmth, her breath upon his chest, her arm snugly wrapped around his waist. The happiness in his chest was so intense that he wondered if he could die from it. There was a new openness between them since their in-depth talk the night before. His feelings of love for her had increased to new levels. He slid his fingers down her spine, hearing her hum of appreciation for his caress.

It was nearly midnight, but he didn't care. They'd continued their same routines from before the threat of Tefere David had reared its ugly head. Plans were in place. The new contractors had arrived, and apartments were found for them. He knew Luke had

his job cut out for him, but he was an ex-Navy SEAL and knew how to put an op together. Shep had total confidence in the man. He felt badly about Dev being forced to have Luke live with her. That had to be stressful as hell on her.

“I can hear you thinking,” Willow said, kissing his jaw, easing away, and propping herself up on one elbow.

He grinned. “You were always good at knowing when I switched gears.”

Her lips twisted. “Yes, you went from the little head down... here,” and she reached out, sliding her fingers around his erection that was half what it had just been, “to the big head on your shoulders.”

Chuckling, he closed his eyes, appreciating her soft fingers gently massaging him, the sensation more than pleasant. “Okay, that’s all true, but I like what you’re doing right now. My big head has stopped thinking.” He heard her laughter, met her shadowed eyes, saw new embers of desire igniting in their depths. Reaching out, he moved a few strands of wild hair away from her brow. “I want to do something, but I’m not sure you’ll approve,” he told her, holding her curious gaze.

“Tell me?”

“I’d like to take you to a jewelry store here in town when you feel like it, Willow. I’d like to buy you a friendship ring, something you can wear, if you want, that symbolizes us. I hesitated to talk to you about this because it’s probably way too soon in our journey together,” and he searched her expression. Willow’s lips were luscious, and he wanted to curve his mouth over them right now, but he controlled the need. Her gaze grew thoughtful, and she looked away for a moment. Shep could tell she was weighing his words carefully.

“What pushed you to want to do this so soon, Shep?”

“Probably damn near getting killed the other afternoon.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too.” She sat up, crossing her legs, her forearms resting on her knees. Pushing much of her unruly red hair across her shoulders, she said, “You know when I left you? I put the engagement and wedding ring on the table in front of you.”

“You did.”

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“Did you throw them away?”

He shook his head. “No. I kept them. Why?”

Reaching out, she smoothed her hand across his deep, well-developed chest. “Where are they now?”

“At my condo in Alexandria, Virginia. I have them in a small safe.” He saw so many emotions flitting through her green eyes, unsure of this line of questioning.

“Why didn’t you get rid of them, Shep?”

“Because I never wanted to lose you. I later realized you left for good reasons, Willow. I kept the rings because you had worn them. Sometimes? I would pull them out, just hold them and remember the good times, the laughter, and the love we made to one another. They always gave me comfort when I was feeling raw and lonely.”

She compressed her lips, her hand stilling over his heart. “I always wondered what you’d done with them.”

“To throw them away would have been throwing away the truth that I loved you,” he said in a low, emotional tone. “I didn’t want you to leave in the first place, Willow and you knew that. I don’t begrudge you leaving. I wasn’t a very good partner for you at that time.”

“Except in bed, and there... you were stellar.”

“Yes, in bed, but we both know now that’s only part of a relationship.”

“Do I ever.” She caressed his stubbled jaw. “I’m glad you kept them, though. That warms my heart. It gives me hope for us.”

“I’ll never part with them, no matter what happens to us now or in the future,” he told her. “I found out my love for you didn’t die with time, Angel. It only grew, and those rings always made me feel hope. I never really thought we’d ever see one another again. I really didn’t.”

“But here we are.” She smoothed her fingers across his upper chest, its dark hair only emphasizing his sheer maleness.

“I’m glad we’re here,” he said, placing his hand over hers. “I know this is a fragile time between us right now, Willow. I know it’s going to take time to see if we can make it work for us. I’m fine with just living with you. I’m not asking for a commitment. I have to earn that from you. I thought of the friendship ring because we’d met and become friends first. I saw the ring as my silent promise to you to become a better partner, that’s all. It wasn’t to buy the ring to force you into staying with me or anything like that.”

“I wasn’t sure, Shep.” She sighed and leaned down, kissing his mouth. Easing away, she added “But I am now. I like the philosophy behind the friendship ring. A symbol that we’re both serious about one another, that we’re both committed to try and make it work this time around.” She straightened, her voice growing husky. “And when I thought, we were going to die out there? All my regrets were centered on you. I really wanted that second chance with you.” She frowned. “I didn’t think we’d get it, especially when I damned near drowned. When that underwater limb snagged my trouser and hauled me under, I thought... it was lights out.” She shivered a little, pulling her hand from beneath his. “When I was under? I was terrified. I knew if I breathed in, I’d drown. I was so scared. More than I’d ever been in my whole life.

And when I was trying to jerk my pant leg free, all I could think about was you. The good times. The laughter. The love...”

He moved his hand across the curve of her firm thigh. “Sometimes it takes a near-death experience for us to see what’s important. I’ve seen it in my Seabees after an attack by the Taliban. It changes them forever.”

“It sure changed me, Shep. When you rescued me? I swore that I’d move heaven and earth to persuade you to come back to me, so we could try again.”

“Really?” His heart thumped once to underscore his surprise. His pleasure. The amusement dancing in Willow’s eyes made him grin a little.

“Really.”

“I’m sorry it took that near drowning to get us where we’re at now,” he said, “but I like the outcome of it.” He watched her eyes grow soft with love for him. “And I’m fine if you don’t want a friendship ring right now. Just let it sit with you. In the future? If it feels right to you? We’ll go get one.”

“I’d have to wear it around my neck as a necklace.”

Shep understood. Military pilots never wore jewelry on their fingers while flying, not even a wedding ring. Nothing that could snag on a control. “It will be yours to do with as you want.”

“I want you in my life, Shep. I want you underfoot. And since this first construction job is going to take you a year to complete here in Ethiopia, I think we’ll have a pretty good idea by then of whether we’re making this work or not. Do you agree?”

“Absolutely.” He knew nothing was for sure. Nothing in life ever was, as he’d found

out from a very early age. “All we have in life is changes, Willow. I don’t know what’s going to be thrown at us while we’re here, but I’m willing to deal with it because I love you.” His hand stilled on her thigh. “I know this can work and I think you know that too.”

“I do,” she whispered, giving him a watery smile. “But it’s one day at a time with you, Porter. I’m not going back to the way it was and, if you revert, I’ll be in your face about it, because I can’t live that way.”

“Fine, be in my face. Tell me when I’m not opening up as much as you want, Willow. I’m not afraid to hand myself over to you now that I realize what I was knee-jerking about and doing to you... to us.”

“Good.”

He heard the relief in her voice, and so much more. Hope burned bright in her look of love for him, and Shep knew they would make this trial work for them, not against. This time if it worked out, they would live together, not necessarily get married. Both were gun-shy of the whole marriage option at this point. But he didn’t care, as long as they lived together, loved, laughed and enjoyed life with each other. All that, he knew, was possible. He wrapped his hand around her elbow. “Come on, lay down here beside me? We have to get some sleep. It’s gonna to be a long day tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 15

Tefere smiled to himself. It had been two weeks since he’d tried to kidnap the red-haired American woman pilot. With five hundred soldiers at his fingertips, the ones that had been either killed or captured earlier were easily replaced. Zere, a thirty-five-year-old Somali he’d grown up with, had come in to be his new second-in-command. Never giving up on getting that American woman, they watched the flights the two female pilots flew in and out of the Bahir Dar airport. From there, on the

south side of Lake Tana, they transported the supplies needed for the construction projects to Addis Zemen airport, located on the east side of the lake. Sweat trickled down Tefere's bearded face constantly over the long hours he spent hiding inside the airport's huge supply warehouse at Bahir Dar, learning and listening. The beard was new. He had grown it over the last two weeks to conceal his identity somewhat, and it still itched and annoyed him, especially with never-ending perspiration running through it. His inside man, Zere, had been hired by the manager of the warehouse facility to load construction materials onto the two women's Otter airplane, and had been doing so for nearly the past two weeks.

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Zere kept as low a profile as possible, blending in among the workers, keeping his ears open and his mouth shut. Why, he'd even brushed elbows with the red-haired American pilot Willow Chamberlin and her copilot, Dev Mitchell. He'd noted down the pilots' daily, grueling schedule. Another key point Zere had discovered was the presence of a male security guard who always flew with the two pilots and was, in essence, their constant bodyguard, and a fly in his side's collective ointment. Tefere knew that the operator was more than likely an ex-SEAL, based on what he'd heard from Zere. The man carried a particular type of pistol, a Sig Sauer P226 MK25, that only SEALs utilized. An intimidating weapon indeed. It didn't even have a safety on it so, in the right hands, it was deadly. A cartridge was always chambered and all the operator had to do was draw, point and shoot, in one smooth, unbroken motion. No doubt about it, this bodyguard was ex-SEAL as far as Zere was concerned. This made him maintain a very low profile to not draw any unwanted attention to himself as he memorized the layout of the plane, its daily routine, flying hours, and its loading and unloading schedule.

He was much less identifiable now, especially if spotted briefly by chance. He was betting that the Delos people had provided photos of Tefere not only to that security operator, but also to the two pilots. The new beard would throw them off from a distance. But this was largely a backup precaution; in any case, his leader wasn't about to show his face to anyone; remaining hidden within the many rows and stacks of crates lining the warehouse. He was ensconced, sitting pretty. No one knew Zere's face or his background. Now, all he had to do was remain inconspicuous and wait for the right opening to put his leader's plan into action.

Terefe saw Zere's worried expression. A lot was riding on his young lieutenant to carry off this charade. Saying nothing, he watched Zere leave and walk down the

main aisle toward today's work assignment. Mind turning to the future, he knew there were hills of various elevations on the eastern side of the lake, and therein lay the small town of Zegye, nestled within the thick pine forest, hacked from which was a short dirt runway the perfect length on which to land the Otter. This was the village where the Delos construction team was currently working, and where their equipment was being flown into. Tefere already had his two Toyota Hilux's in place nearby, packed full of his soldiers armed and ready to take either one or both pilots as prisoners. He would like nothing better than to get both women and escape via the main highway out of Bahir Dar, and then drive the straight into Somalia. There, he'd present them to his adoptive father. In a Zoom session with the warlord yesterday, Cumar Hanad had been excited because two of the most prolific sex traffickers in all of Europe and Asia were visiting him. Tefere desperately wanted to parade the red-haired American woman before them all, thus boosting his ego, his power, and his wallet. If he could get the second pilot, the brown-haired American woman as a bonus, that would be an unexpected and incredible coup! The sex traffickers already wanted to buy one or both of them. Although Cumar had originally planned to livestream the red-haired woman's beheading on the internet, the two sex traffickers were already in a bidding war to buy her for their own needs, so she had to be kept alive and useful to them. Someone like this woman, the warlord had told Tefere, would go for millions of U.S. dollars on their dark web marketplace. Cumar would make a fortune on the deal, and of course, having captured them, Tefere would be handsomely rewarded, too.

Tefere didn't care what happened to the women. He only wanted the money and the power status that would come with a successful abduction. His star would rise with Cumar, and that meant more money pouring into his efforts here in Ethiopia. The tempo of the construction materials' transfer from the warehouse to the Otter, the loading time, and the time it took the Otter to fly from Bahir Dar to either Addis Zemen or Zegye and back, were all scribbled down in his notebook. They were making six to eight flights a day, feeding the demands of the construction work at the two villages. For now? He would wait for an opportunity to pounce. And, sooner or

later, it would come.

Willow missed Shep being in her condo, in her life. It was a Tuesday in early December, and the demands of the work had been grueling. He was gone five days a week, sometimes six or even all seven, depending upon how construction was coming along at the Addis Zemen and Zegye sites. She was preparing to leave her condo, dressed in her blue one-piece flight suit, grabbing her go bag, when her cell phone rang.

“Willow here.” Only a very few people had her personal number.

“Dev here. Hey, I’m sicker than a dog. That new security woman who’s staying with me? Ginny Long? She’s got a fever of one-hundred-four and I’m one hundred and three. I’m calling the doctor, and I’ll get him to come out here and see what the hell we have. I can’t fly today, Willow.”

“Bummer,” she muttered. “So, your new security detail is down, too?”

“Yes. We think it’s from food poisoning. I bought some Ethiopian food from a street vendor last night, and I think that’s what nailed us. We’re heaving our guts out and have uncontrollable diarrhea. Maybe the doctor can give us something for it. You aren’t going to have a copilot for today, sorry.”

“No worries. Call the doc, Dev. I can do the flights today and handle all the rest on my own, no problem.”

“Are you sure? Is that safe?”

“Absolutely. Shep needs what we’re bringing in today more than ever. I can’t sit on

the tarmac and not fly because of a sick security guard. You know how this goes.”

Sighing, Dev said, “Yes, I do. I’m so sorry to leave you in the lurch. Can Luke fly with you as security?”

“He’s at Addis Zemen full time now. Shep is back and forth between that village and Zegye. There’s been a couple of incursions by, he thinks, Tefere David’s soldiers, trying to steal the material that’s been flown in. So, he’s busy with his security people, stopping the steal before it happens.”

“Bummer, I forgot about that angle.”

“I’ll be fine,” Willow said confidently. “We’ve got the whole system down pat now at the airport. You two just rest, drink lots of water and keep hydrated, get that doctor out to help. I’m sure by the time I come home at dusk, you’ll feel a lot better.”

“I hope so,” Dev grumbled. “Just take care, Willow. Stay alert. You got your .45 on you?”

Laughing, she said, “Yes, oh great Mother Hen of the Sky, I’m armed to the teeth. Stop being SUCH a worrywart!”

They both laughed.

“I’ll call you tonight,” Willow promised, grabbing her sack lunch and stuffing it into her go bag. Locking the condo door, she headed for the elevator, the dawn barely visible on the eastern horizon, a thin strip of gauzy golden color against the black night sky. In no time, she was in her vehicle, speeding toward the airport. There were layers of security to go through and she kept her identification around her neck so she could get waved through quickly by the Ethiopian gate security people.

The Otter was out of the hangar after going through its one-hundred-hour flight inspection by trained engine mechanics last night. She saw the warehouse truck backed up to the rear hatch, and four men offloading materials from it and placing them in the long storage space of the workhorse plane's interior fuselage. After pulling up on the side of the hangar and parking, grabbing her gear, she walked quickly to the plane, recognizing all the men who were doing the offloading. She smiled and halted.

"Hey," she called, holding up a sack, "pastis for all of you," and she handed it to the foreman of the truck. "There's one for each of you." Pastis was a beloved Ethiopian pastry made of fried bread, looking somewhat like a donut without the hole. She always bought them a sack from a nearby bakery before the first flight out of the day, knowing how hard they were going to work until dusk for Delos. The foreman, a man in his fifties with steel-gray and black hair, took the sack, smiling. He had three front teeth missing.

"Thank you," he said in stilted English. He held up the bag to the other three, hollering in Ethiopian that there would be pastis waiting for them after they got the plane loaded. The foreman turned back to her, nodding his thanks, his dark-brown eyes sparkling. "You take good care of us, Miss Willow."

She grinned and pulled herself up into the rear of the plane. "Well, you guys always earn them. Hey, can I have one of your men come along with me? I'm short two people today. I'll need someone to help offload at the other end. Maybe give the guy a little extra money for today?"

"But," the foreman said, looking around, "where is Miss Dev and her woman friend?"

"Sick with food poisoning," Willow told him. "She'll be okay by tomorrow most likely, though. I just need an extra pair of hands to help unload the supplies at the other end, is all." Usually, Ginny and Dev helped with that on each trip. There wasn't

anything on this trip that two people couldn't lift and carry to the rear hatch door and hand off to the awaiting construction workers.

“I DO!”

Willow saw a tall man, ropy-muscled, come forward, raising his hand. “Okay,” she said.

The foreman said, “Willow, this is Zere. He is big and strong. He is originally from Somalia. Doesn't speak much else. But he knows work. He can do the work of two women,” and he laughed, slapping the workman on the back good naturedly.

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Nodding to the tall man, she said, “Please get those fence posts in here, Zere,” and she pointed where to place them behind the co-pilot’s seat, next to the hatch. They were the main staves for the ten-foot-tall cyclone fences. Normally, they would be placed horizontally across the deck of the plane for safety, but it was already piled with too many boxes. There would be nobody in harm’s way on this trip anyway, so it would have to do. This was the heaviest load she’d carry today; weighty items had to sit in the center of the Otter, and in this case, near the hatch so they were balanced against all the boxes on the left side of the fuselage deck. Last on, first off.

“Yes... ma’am,” Zere struggled in halting English, giving a quick bow of his head.

Smiling, she nodded. “Come on board when you get done, Zere. I’ll go through my pre-flight check list right now. Just find someplace to sit in the back, behind me.”

Willow didn’t know exactly how much of what she said Zere actually understood, but he seemed to get the gist and nodded obediently, beginning to handle the thirty staves with his thickly gloved hands, carefully stacking them, sliding them in from the rear hatch. His eyes narrowed as he watched her weave between the gear, going to the pilot’s seat and strapping in. Smiling to himself, sweat dripping off him from the hard work, he looked back and saw the foreman and the remaining worker going to the truck cab near the hangar entrance, to sit and eat their pastis. Once they had disappeared inside, he pulled out his cell phone, moving outside the plane, back behind the truck, to send a quick text to David with the details of this fortuitous change. Once done, he continued to slide the heavy iron staves carefully into the cabin.

Glancing back, Willow saw Zere was half-finished with the last of the load. She made

a call to Luke Gibson, letting him know her status.

“I’m flying without Dev and Ginny today,” she told Luke, giving him the details.

“You’re alone?”

Hearing alarm in Luke’s voice, she said, “Zere, one of the foreman’s men, is flying in with me. He’ll help offload all this stuff and I’ll keep him with me all day for the rest of the flights.”

“I don’t have his name on my roster of personnel cleared to fly with you. Do you know this guy?” Luke demanded.

“He’s worked for our foreman the last two weeks. Quiet, very respectful and a hard worker. He doesn’t know a lot of English, but enough. Seems like an okay dude to me.”

“Damn,” Luke muttered. “I don’t like this, Willow.”

“It’ll be okay,” she breezily assured him. “It’s a twenty-five-minute flight to where you are at Addis Zemen. You can buttonhole him all you want once we land. Fair enough?”

“Do you have his last name?”

“No, and he’s originally from Somalia, and speaks only very basic Ethiopian and English it seems. I don’t speak much Somali, nor could I spell his last name probably, even if he understood what I wanted,” she said. “He’s fine. He’s been very nice. Besides,” she joked, “I bring this team a bag of pastis every morning so it’s in their best interests to look out for me. Seriously though, they’re a reliable, hard-working crew.”

“Somalia, Willow?” said Luke, his voice grating. “That’s where Tefere is from!”

“Luke, a bunch of the laborers here are from there. It doesn’t mean they are all in with Tefere.” replied Willow.

“Okay, fair enough, but I don’t have him on my cell phone list, either,” Luke muttered unhappily again.

Willow could hear his frustration as he returned to flipping through a sheaf of papers, on his ever-present clipboard. “I’ve put his name in my cell phone security app, but there’s nothing coming up on him. Without a last name, I’m screwed.”

“He’ll give you his last name in about half an hour,” Willow promised. “I’ve got a clear blue sky, no wind.” Willow knew that flying in the cool early morning like this is always easier than later in the day when they get bounced all over the place with air pockets formed by the afternoon heat rising off the lake. “I should arrive right on schedule.”

“Okay...,” Luke grumbled unhappily.

She heard concern in his tone. “Relax. Things will be fine. Hey, is Shep around?”

“He’s down below with the well-drilling crew right now.”

“Oh... okay.” Willow wanted to talk with him, but it wasn’t possible. And as soon as the materials were offloaded at the airport, she’d have to turn right back around and return to Bahir Dar. She wouldn’t see him until tonight. “Gotta go, Luke. See you soon.”

“Roger that,” he said.

Just after she was finished on the phone, it suddenly rang, and she answered it. The foreman was calling, telling her that they were going back to the warehouse for the next shipment's load. She thanked him and saw the truck drawing away from the airplane hangar.

“Uhhhh....ma...madam?” Zere called from the hatch.

Willow turned. “Yes?” So, Zere knew SOME English, although the way he said it, it took her a moment to realize the English word he'd struggled to speak.

He motioned toward the fully packed cargo and then to the wheel chocks with a questioning, pulling gesture.

“Great. Yes, remove the chocks. Thanks, Zere!” and she turned, pulling on her earphones, making a call to the tower for a runway clearance and designation.

As she waited on instructions, she kept busy, finishing up the pre-flight list and saw Zere removing the chocks. Focused on her work; checking the gauges, making sure there was plenty of fuel in the wings, the weight of the plane, that the oil was at the correct setting, she heard the rear hatch slam closed. She felt the familiar pressure that followed and kept checking off each item with her pen.

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Cold metal pressed into the side of her neck.

Willow froze.

“Do not move, Willow Chamberlin.”

The voice was raspy, near her ear, and she could smell garlic and fish.

“Hands on the yoke,” the man ordered. He leaned down, unsnapping the leather safety around her pistol, removing the .45 from its holster.

She left the kneeboard in place on her right thigh, letting the pen drop, placing her hands on the yoke. Her heart thudded harshly in her chest. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the hulking shadow and shape of the man. He was bearded, unlike Zere, and the voice was different: deeper and chilling. His pistol pressed hard into the side of her neck. Pain radiated from around the point of contact. “Who are you?” she demanded, although she was afraid, she already knew the answer.

He chuckled. “I will ask the questions, woman, not you. But you can call me Tefere.”

Willow gasped; her fear confirmed. He pressed the barrel into her neck even harder.

“I didn’t catch you those many weeks ago, but now? I have you.” He turned, speaking in Somali to Zere, who sat down in the rear, drawing his own gun, sitting by the bulkhead in the rear, behind the copilot’s seat, aiming it at her. “Now,” he said triumphantly, “Zere has his pistol trained on your head. I’m going to remove mine and I am going to sit down in this seat, next to you. Listen carefully.” He pulled out a

piece of note paper. “You are to put these GPS coordinates into your plane’s computer. We aren’t going where you’d planned. Do it now,” and he handed the paper to her.

Willow’s throat was tight with terror. She took the paper, seeing the GPS numbers scrawled across it. “I have to know where this is,” she said, punching the numbers in. “I have to know what I’m looking for on my screen. I have to adjust altitude, so we don’t fly into a mountain.”

“Zegye, Ethiopia.”

She swallowed hard, the map coming up on her screen. Half the construction crew was at another small village northeast of Bahir Dar, roughly twenty minutes away from Addis Zemen by helicopter. Shep was there with them. Her mind whirled with terror, trying to think through the situation. She was glad the barrel of his pistol was off her neck. She heard Zere settling his back against the rear bulkhead, sitting atop the cardboard boxes that ran the length of the plane. Zere had to be one of David’s soldiers! Which meant he would be a cold-blooded killer, too. “Why are we going there?” she demanded, giving David a challenging look.

Tefere smiled hugely, relaxing in the copilot’s seat. “Take off for Zegye and I will tell you on the way there.”

She looked hard at the screen. “There’s only a one-thousand-foot dirt runway outside of that town. This load is so heavy I need a much longer runway, or we risk a crash. This load was supposed to go to Addis Zemen.”

“Easy for your Otter to land on. Yes?” he asked.

Nodding, she muttered, “A dirt strip is a dirt strip. But it’s not as long. This is the heaviest load of the day. I may not be able to land and stop before the end of the

strip.” She switched the button, the screen now showing a satellite view of the general area. The strip sat at around twenty-five hundred feet, surrounded by heavy forest at the top end and scrub brush at the bottom. It was in the hills, if they could be called such, tall as they were. She saw a main road leading into Zegye, a lakeside village, and it hooked up directly with a main highway. Trying to put it together, she asked, “Why not let me go to Addis Zemen?”

“I want this plane in the air, heading for Zegye,” he snapped. “Now! Or Zere will shoot you where you sit.”

Willow believed him. She heard the tower give her clearance to take off. “Okay,” she grunted. “Put your seatbelt on.”

“I don’t do anything a woman tells me,” David growled. “Take off!”

Her U-1A DeHavilland Otter was one of the toughest utility aircraft in the world. It had two landing wheels up front and a smaller one near the tail of the craft. It could carry eight-thousand pounds, fly a hundred and sixty miles an hour, and go as high as seventeen thousand feet, although Willow rarely flew above thirty-five hundred. It had a long narrow nose, a single propeller, and its rugged power plant was a Pratt and Whitney Wasp radial engine that, at its full six hundred horsepower, charged the plane along through the air at a thundering pace. It wasn’t a flashy plane by any means, but it was the greatest workhorse in the sky, used around the world. It could take a beating and keep on going. Its wingspan was fifty-eight feet, longer than a greyhound bus by almost half. Willow wondered why they were flying to this fishing village. What was waiting there? What was David going to do with her? She tried to keep the idea of being decapitated away from her, but it was impossible.

For the next ten minutes, she was trundling the Otter out of the apron area and onto the side runway that would get her to the take-off point. The tension in the cabin felt both fragile and hard to her. How could she alert Luke that she was being kidnapped?

Anchoring the Otter at the end of the runway, she received final permission for takeoff, and pushed the throttle gently forward, the engine growing louder and louder, the craft shaking and trembling. She lightened the contact her flight boots had with the rudder pedals, and the Otter lurched forward, moving ever faster and faster, everything becoming a blur outside the cabin. She was heading into a nightmare and knew it.

The Otter's engine thundered, the craft vibrated and shook, hauling the plane with its eight-thousand-pound cargo up into the humid morning air. The sun had just breasted the horizon and Willow put on her aviator sunglasses. She made a dogleg turn at the end of the airport, gaining altitude, paralleling it. Eventually, the Otter flew past its perimeter and she banked the plane to the northeast, toward Zegye. She saw David pick up the other set of earphones and settle them over his head, pulling the microphone close to his lips.

"Very nice takeoff. You are a good pilot for a woman."

Willow said nothing, her gaze constantly moving right to left across her controls. She had both hands on the yoke, the pedals now becoming the rudder for the craft as she lightly eased her boots onto the rubber surface of each.

"Originally," David said, leaning back, smiling, "I had great dreams of kidnapping you and selling you to my adoptive father, Warlord, in Somalia."

Willow jerked a look in his direction.

"Keep flying," he snarled.

She turned her face forward, her heart beginning a slow pounding of dread.

"But...", and he laughed, turning in the seat, speaking Somali to Zere, who then burst

into laughter with him. Turning back to her, he said, “Instead, plans changed for you. Two of the most powerful and richest sex-traffickers in the world, one from Europe and the other from Pakistan, heard that I was going to capture you. They wanted to buy you instead of having my father decapitate you on the internet. They too, know the value of an American white woman with red hair.”

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Willow felt terror. She gulped, her throat dry and pinched feeling. She forced a swallow.

“Without even having you in my hands as my prisoner, they began a bidding war with each other. Zakir Sharan, a Pakistani billionaire from Punjabi, and Valdrin Rasari, born and living in the country of Malgar, near Albania, want you, instead. Now, the bidding is still going on very briskly. Right now, Rasari has bid ten million dollars for you.”

She gasped, giving him a startled look.

“Fly!” he roared, sitting up, curling his hand into a fist, threatening to strike her.

Jerking her head forward again, her heart crashing in her chest, she felt terror as never before.

“You see,” David said, relaxing and sitting crossways in the seat, staring at her, enjoying the fear he saw in her expression, “you had better hope that Rasari wins this bidding war for your body. If, on the other hand, Zakir Sharan is the top bidder, he will use your body for as long as it pleases him, and then? He will have you decapitated on a livestream that I’m sure will go viral.”

Willow couldn’t think. Her mind blanked out momentarily. David and Zere were laughing uproariously. She studied the changing landscape below her; the plains had become foothills as they climbed in elevation. Zegye sat next to Lake Tana, but the airstrip was up in the hills above it at twenty-six hundred feet. She took the plane up to thirty-five hundred.

“Now,” David said pleasantly, a finger on his lower lip, looking out at the blue sky in front of them, “Do not think you are getting off lucky. As your American slang goes? What is the saying? Leaping from the frying pan into the fire? Yes, I think this suits the situation perfectly. Rasari is a sadistic sexual monster, even by my standards. Did you know? He lives in the mountains, has his own village, only the village consists entirely of women he breeds to excellent male studs from all countries, and then he puts the resulting children up for auction all around the world. If you are from Africa, you will want a black child. If you are from Asia, a Chinese child, or if from South America, a Latino child, and so on. And of course, white children are in highest demand. He traffics in babies bred at his breeding facility. Only they are humans instead of horses being bred and sold.” He laughed deeply, slapping his knee.

Her stomach turned. She wanted to vomit. Her fingers tightened around the yoke.

“Rasari, of course, is the top stallion of the place and he personally impregnates the most beautiful teen girls who are brought to him, whom he refers to as his ‘broodmare band.’ Now with you? I wonder what he’ll do with you. He also makes the most interesting pornographic videos in the world. Sells them for thousands, sometimes millions of dollars, to very rich men who enjoy watching what can be done sexually with a child or young girl’s body. And then, there’s this other side to him. He likes rough sex. He likes women who fight back, and I think you fall into that category. He really likes red-haired women. Or,” and David laughed, sharing a quick joke with Zere, “perhaps he will free you in the mountains, then he will stalk you, chase you through the woods, tiring you until he hunts you down, and he has his men strip you naked, hold you down while he rapes you. And of course, this will be on video to be sold. And, he could possibly impregnate you, see if you throw red-headed children, which, by the way, are in the highest of demand because they fight and possess a warrior’s heart, and he always gets the highest price for them, no matter what their age is.”

Willow thought she knew fear, but this pulverized her emotionally. Looking around

casually, as if she were not shaken to her core, she kept a sharp eye on the terrain below. They were now flying over a thick carpet of forest. Up ahead, less than ten minutes away, was Zegye. She punched several buttons on the console.

David grabbed her wrist, hard.

She cried out, trying to jerk away.

“What are you doing, bitch?” he snarled.

“Nothing! I have to prepare for landing. Let me go!” and she wrenched her wrist out of his fingers.

David glared at her. “Oh, I’m hoping that Rasari bids the highest. He beats women like you into the ground. He’ll torture you. You’ll wish you could die every day you wake up in his concubine building. You will become a hollow shell of yourself, your eyes dead and glazed over, no fight left in you, only whimpers and pain every time you move.”

Lips thinning, she bit back a curse. David didn’t realize it, but she had hit the locator button that would continually broadcast her GPS to any airport within range. Not only that, but she had also engaged an SOS emergency call that her plane was going down and would crash. That would alert the Addis Zemen airport tower where she was supposed to have landed that she was way off course at least. Would Luke Gibson be aware of this? Was he hooked up to the tower there? Even if so, would they immediately alert him of her SOS call? She had no way of knowing but prayed that it was so. If they received the signal, a search and rescue helicopter would be sent out immediately to her last known GPS location. She prayed that Luke was a man of infinite details and would have their course monitored closely on every flight. But she couldn’t be sure. Nothing was for sure, anymore.

Willow racked her brain for ways to escape. It was a thousand-foot runway. Her pistol was gone, but she kept a spare in her go bag. However, that was stashed behind her seat and she couldn't reach it. There was also her cell phone in the bag, as well as a satellite phone, all encased in waterproof bags and charged. If she could get to her go bag? Escape? She could call Luke. And he would instantly alert Shep. Could they save her? Was there anywhere to run and hide from David? Could she survive a crash? Or was it better to die in a crash than be taken by these heartless monsters who saw her only as a sub-human to be bid upon and sold?

She had bare minutes to come up with a plan. Any plan was better than none. She cobbled one together and locked it in. She told David, "There's the airstrip. I'm going in for a bush landing."

"What is that?" David demanded, scowling.

"A short landing, drop in hard and anchor it quickly, because it's such a short landing strip."

He waved his hand. "Fine, whatever you need to land there."

She looked down to the far end of the runway. There were two white Toyota Hilux pickup trucks stopped there. She saw at least three men in the back of each, standing behind the cabs, and even from this distance, something about their outline and stance told her they were heavily armed. There appeared to be a single driver behind the wheel of each truck.

A thousand feet...

She saw a lot of scrub brush and trees that were probably around twenty feet tall at the near end of the runway where she needed to touch down. Below, on either side of the plane flowed by mature woods, some of the trees fifty to seventy feet tall. It was a

thickly wooded area, and that gave her hope. Now? All she had to do was survive what she was going to do next.

David sat languidly, looking at her, no harness on. Zere had his gun always on her. Could she, do it? Could she pull this off?

Willow didn't know, but she sure as hell was NOT going to be taken prisoner!

As she dropped the Otter suddenly, the nose pointing down at the very end of the approaching runway, the engine shrieked. She dropped the plane hard, slowing the trundling beast, its tail suddenly flipping skyward.

David was thrown against the console. He cried out in rage, flailing around, arms akimbo, nose bloody.

Zere screamed and held on. He fired the gun.

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The cabin boomed with the report.

Something buzzed by her ear. The cockpit Plexiglas fractured but held, the impact of the bullet spiderwebbing cracks all over it, partially obscuring Willow's view.

But she knew well enough where they were! She brought the tail down sharply, flinging David back into his seat, screaming curses.

The instant the tail cleared the edge of the dirt runway, she suddenly raised the nose of the Otter high into the sky.

The stall buzzer started shrieking throughout the plane's interior.

The nose of the Otter swung higher, then stopped abruptly.

David was slammed headfirst against the ceiling, and he cursed and cried out.

Zere was thrown into the air. His gun flew from his hand as he hit the back of the copilot's seat with an "OOF!" and clattered away as he collapsed to the metal deck.

A split second later, Willow shoved the yoke forward just as the rear wheel slammed into the dirt. The fuselage of the plane fell forward like a felled tree, the force of their impact buckling both front struts, blowing their tires, the propeller ploughing into the dirt. Dust exploded all around them, pluming hundreds of feet into the air. The aircraft augured into the runway like a D10 Caterpillar plowing a wall of dirt before it. Everything in the cargo area rushed forward from the massive deceleration.

She heard Zere scream out, collapsing behind the co-pilot's seat.

Suddenly, three more of the pointed iron posts shot forward from the rear of the cargo hold, slamming out through the front of the copilot's seat. They didn't hit David, but what they did do was imprison him. His gun flew from his hand, disappearing beneath the cockpit console. He was trapped in the seat! There was no way for him to reach her!

The Otter slid fifty more feet, tearing metal screeching against the dirt runway, and jerked to a stop.

Yanking off her harness, Willow whipped around, diving through the space between the two seats. To her horror, she saw Zere impaled through the torso by two of the fence stakes, eyes staring at her, dead.

Grabbing her go bag, Willow knew she had only seconds or less before David's soldiers would start their Toyotas and race to the crash site. Breathing hard, she yanked the bag's strap across her shoulders, stepping through the tangle of equipment, striking the opening with her flight boot, the hatch jerking open. Leaping out, she sprinted toward the rear of the plane, still not seen by the soldiers through the thick, swirling cloud of dust surrounding the Otter's crash. Leaping off the edge of the strip, she found herself in the woods, coughing and gagging from the dust.

Hurry! Hurry! She raced downhill, leaves, branches and rocks racing by all around her. It was rough and hard running. She had to hide! She had to make those soldiers think she was still somewhere inside the Otter! She had to have those precious moments to disappear into the thick, tall bushes and heavy woodlands, and escape their eyes.

Hurry!

CHAPTER 16

Luke Gibson had a bad feeling. His phone did not ring at the ten-minute mark as he stood in the Operations building of the Addis Zemen airport waiting for Willow's call. What the hell? He knew she was flying solo this morning, without help from her copilot, and with only an inexperienced worker along to help with the heavy lifting. That would put a lot on her plate, though, which could explain it. He leaned casually against the flight desk, waiting to see if she landed in another ten minutes. He saw Shep entering the Ops building and he lifted his hand, waving him over. The engineer was dirty, sweaty, a white hard hat on his head, work gloves tucked in the back pocket of his well-worn, dusty jeans.

"Coming to see Willow?" Luke inquired in way of a hello.

"Yes, I came to see her, and what supplies she's got on the Otter. We're really hurting for those iron posts." He pulled up the master list from his cell phone. "Says thirty posts should be on the plane. I'm crossing my fingers they are. We need every one of them right now before we can put up more cyclone fence."

Nodding, Luke said, "Looks like General Hakym just flew in three of his Black Hawks with his men about ten minutes ago. Must be going to do some scouting around or they're on a training exercise today. Usually? He's not here at the Addis Zemen airport."

"Busy morning," Shep agreed.

"Mr. Gibson?" a male traffic controller behind the desk called to him.

Luke turned. "Yes?"

"Sir, we've just gotten an SOS and Location GPS on your Otter. Something seems to

be up.”

Shep scowled. “What does that mean, Luke?”

Luke turned fully toward the air traffic controller, who handed him a sheet of paper. “All planes have a location beacon on them,” he explained as he read the Otter’s data printout. “Some have a crash or SOS button that can be pressed if the plane’s in trouble. Delos made sure any plane flown by the charity had that SOS button installed.”

Shep’s heart went into overtime. “Where is she?” He looked at his watch. By now, Willow should have already landed here. Fear began to eat at him.

Luke, still rapidly reading the information on the printout, replied, “I don’t know, but something’s happened.” He looked up at Shep, telling him of Dev and Ginny’s food poisoning, and of the workman from the Bahir Dar warehouse, Zere, who was on board with Willow instead. “I’m calling General Hakym,” scowled Luke, and pulled out his other phone with a direct line to the Ethiopian military leader. The general answered instantly. Luke gave him the Otter’s coordinates.

“That GPS location is here at Zegye,” the air traffic controller said, tapping the clear plastic over a large map on the desk, as Luke waited for the general’s response. “Maybe fifteen minutes northeast of Bahir Dar.” He produced a copy of Willow’s flight plan.

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“Why the hell would she change her flight plan?” Luke demanded, taking it. The man shrugged. Rapidly, he read the sheet, verifying Addis Zemen was her landing airport. “Something isn’t right.”

General Hakym got back on his end of the call, and Luke updated him.

“I just ordered one of our Black Hawks readied to overfly that area,” he told him. “We’re only twenty minutes away from Zegye by helo.”

“We’d like to come along,” Luke said.

“We have room for you.”

“Are you armed?”

“Yes, fully.”

“Good,” Luke growled, “we’ll be there pronto.” He turned to Shep. “Let’s hoof it over there across the revetment.”

As Luke ran, Shep at his side, and they neared the Black Hawk, his satellite phone rang. Slowing, he pulled it out of his knapsack and clicked it on.

“Gibson here.”

“Luke! It’s Willow! I need help! I’m at Zegye. I crash-landed the Otter. Tefere David and Zere hijacked me. They forced me to land at Zegye! I-I’m on the run. They’re

after me! I need help right now!”

Shep froze, hearing her voice. He saw Luke’s eyes go hard as he listened intently to the call.

“Where are you at right now?” he demanded. “Give us some coordinates! I have one of Hakym’s Black Hawks here, ready to fly us to the crash site. We can redline this bird and get to you in no time.”

“I-I...,” and she cursed, her voice low. “I’m hiding in some bushes. I went north-north-east from the touchdown end of the runway. I crashed the bird there on purpose. Zere is dead, but David and his soldiers are going to track me for sure and hunt me down. They’ve got two white Toyota trucks, three men in the back and one driver in each, and they’re heavily armed! My cell phone is damaged, so I can’t give you coordinates. Please, hurry!”

“Okay, what landmarks can you see?” Luke pressed.

“I—oh, I’m in deep woods. I have my compass. At least I know my coordinates, nor’-nor’-east. I’m going down a slope. About a mile ahead, it looks like the woods give way to scrub brushland. Does that help?”

“Anything will help. Do you have your personal cell phone on you?”

“Y-yes.”

“Turn off the sat phone and use that, instead. Is it fully charged?”

“Fully charged every night,” she whispered, breathing hard. “But the screen is cracked from the crash.”

“Doesn’t matter. Turn on its location tracker,” Luke told her. “I’ll be able to find you. We can track you that way.”

“Good idea,” she huffed, trying to catch her breath. “Okay, it’s done. Is it showing up?”

Shep knew that cell coverage was not that reliable here in Ethiopia, and he silently prayed the idea would work. The woman he loved had crashed her plane on purpose. She was in trouble, and he didn’t want to stand here waiting, but Luke had to get a fix on her location.

“I got it,” he said. “Now? Leave your phone on and put it in your go bag. Wear it like a knapsack. Keep up the evasion tactics. Try and stay in the dense-forested area. It’s harder for them to see you or your movement. Don’t step on any fallen branches. The crack will alert them to your position. Got it?”

Breathing hard, she whispered, “Y-yes, I’ll be careful... is Shep there?”

“He is. He’s coming with me. But let’s ring off for now. We need to board this helo.”

How badly Shep wanted to talk to Willow; tell her he loved her, unsure if he would ever see her again. They raced across the revetment area to the Black Hawk, whose blades were already turning. Luke leaped on board and went straight to the general, who was piloting the bird. He knelt between the two cockpit seats and thrust the GPS printout at Hakym. The general took the paper, placing it on the cockpit console in front of him, and the co-pilot started punching in the numbers. Almost instantly, the air crew chief shut the door. The helo was powering up, blades turning faster and faster. Everyone on board was in full military gear, bearing U.S. M4 rifles.

The air crew chief handed them helmets equipped with ICS, Internal Communication System, allowing everyone to talk and be heard over the brutal noise of the helo.

Once the helmets were on their heads, Luke said into his mic, “The general has two spare M4 rifles and magazine vests onboard for us to use.” He turned and one of the soldiers handed him the heavy weapons vest containing four magazines for the M4 rifle he would be using.

Shep grabbed the other vest, with its own ammo, and shrugged into it, the acceleration of the Black Hawk taking off pressing him heavily into his jump seat at the rear of the helo. He was used to wearing a mag vest, so it felt just like being back in Afghanistan, once again. As soon as he was strapped in, Luke handed him an M4. Shep, familiar with the weapon, quickly went through the procedure of checking the rifle while they flew; slapping a magazine into it, loading it, and checking the safety was on. Luke did the same, and then sat cross-legged on the vibrating deck as the Black Hawk flung itself high and fast into the early morning sky.

The smell in the cabin of sweaty soldiers and the vibration of the helo were familiar and comforting to Shep. He tried to keep his terror in check. How close was the enemy to Willow? Had they spotted her yet?

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“Willow always packs a .45 pistol in her go bag,” Shep said to Luke.

“Good to know. A pistol only has about a seventy-five-yard lethal range, though. David’s soldiers have M4s and they can hit someone half a mile away.”

Shep nodded, knowing the vast difference, his heart sinking. If they got a clear shot at Willow? He didn’t want to go there. She wasn’t a ground pounder like he was and didn’t have his kind of combat training. Dropping bombs from a combat jet was a helluva lot different than being on the ground in the middle of a firefight.

He heard General Hakym ordering the other two Black Hawks up and into the fray as well. There were six soldiers, plus a three-man flight crew, in each. Never had he wanted a bird to fly faster than right now. He couldn’t lose Willow! He just couldn’t! He watched as Luke went forward and knelt between the cockpit suite’s seats again. He handed his iPhone to the copilot, who punched in the GPS coordinates where the phone showed Willow presently located. Luke turned and spoke once more to the pilot, General Hakym.

“Can you drop us off near her? She’s going to need protection. She only has a pistol on her.”

Nodding, the general said, “As close as we can. She is in heavy forest terrain. After you’re both off, we will fly to the air strip and see if the pickup trucks are still there, or if they are driving around looking for her. I need to get my men on the ground engaging them ASAP.”

“Roger that,” Luke said. “Thanks,” and he clapped the general’s shoulder, and

returned to where Shep was sitting. He gripped Shep's shoulder. "Hang in there, okay? She knows evasion tactics."

"Plus, she just made a run with me for her life earlier," Shep growled, shaking his head. "Damn it..."

Breathing harshly, watching where she was running down the slope, weaving in and around the pine trees, Willow tried to keep her ears tuned for sounds behind her. She'd skid to a halt, hide behind a wide tree trunk, and then peek back around it, looking for any sign that Tefere was running her down with his cutthroat, murderous soldiers. She knew she'd die rather than be taken alive. No way was she going to become anyone's sex slave! Looking up through the treetops, into the sky, she could see the huge cloud of ruddy-brown dust still hanging over the one end of the airstrip where she'd crashed the Otter. There was no fire. Just hellacious clouds of dust hanging in the humid air. Her whole body ached. When she'd deliberately crashed the plane, her nylon body harness had cut deeply into her shoulders, abdomen and hips. Her flesh must be horribly bruised in dark purple stripes across her body. She wondered if David was unconscious. He appeared to have been at least dazed by the crash, hanging like a puppet, only stirring limply, wedged between the sharp-pointed spears that had plunged through the co-pilot's seat. He'd been literally behind bars, imprisoned by those three fence posts. It was the main reason she'd been able to escape so quickly, along with Zere's final fate, skewered on two of the fence posts through the center mass of his body.

Where were her remaining enemies? Her mind went wild, and she tried to steady her breathing, watching, listening as she ran. Were they onto her yet? Already spotted and were closing in to surround her? Capture her? The thought terrified her even more. The only thing she clung to was the fact that General Hakym was flying a Black Hawk fast in her direction. Luke had her position on his iPhone, guiding them

in. Looking up, she realized with further terror that no helo could land anywhere near where she was presently at. The bird needed an open area to land, not a damned forest.

Jerking back around, Willow saw she was within half a mile of the scrubland below. The bird could land there! Looking back, she waffled over the choice. The forest gave her much more safety compared to running out in the open where she'd be easily spotted. Yet, if she wanted rescued, she HAD to go to the scrubland! How she wished for a Kevlar vest! She knew that David's soldiers carried smuggled M4s, and they could well be using those awful frangible rounds that, once entering her body, would blow apart and rupture her vital organs, killing her instantly, with no chance of surgery to save her. Wiping her face with a shaking hand, she chose her only real option, terrifying as it was, and turned, starting her run, heading down toward the potential kill zone of the scrubland.

The wind whistled past Willow's sweaty features. She focused on the ground where her booted feet would hit. There were lots of unseen rocks beneath the dry, brown pine needles. She kept slipping, a few times almost spraining her ankle, her arms flailing outward to maintain balance as she ran as if on an invisible, wobbly tightrope. Her lungs burned with every breath, but she had to keep going regardless, or else she was going to die.

Shep! Her heart felt as if it were going to burst with such pain, agony tearing through her, her love for him making tears rush to her eyes. She rapidly blinked them away, running faster, leaping over rocks and small bushes. They'd just made progress with one another! Willow wanted to live, to have that chance to be with him, for them to work through their flaws and make them positives, instead of the negatives that had torn them apart before. She loved him! He was wonderful, deeply wounded, but trying so hard to heal his childhood trauma, to give them a chance at a happy life together. Oh! How could this all be happening right now? She kept up her pace, a slow run, keeping her stride long and cadenced while trying to maintain balance; the

hardest challenge of all.

Suddenly, a burst of bark flew off from a nearby pine, nearly blinding her. She fell, hand against her face. Slamming hard into the earth, she rolled. Scrambling to her feet, she saw two other pieces of bark exploding at chest height from the trees right where she'd fallen. Oh, no! Breathing raspy, lungs hurting, she lifted her head and saw one of David's soldiers standing far up the slope, M4 pointed down at her, doing the firing. There was no way her pistol could make that range and take him down before he got her. Just as she recovered her footing, she fell again, grunting in pain. A hidden rock had twisted her ankle. Crawling around, rocks bruising her legs and belly, she moved to the next tree trunk that was wide enough for cover, keeping her head down, anxiously on the lookout for more enemies. They knew where she was, now...

Fear shot through Willow, and she leaped unsteadily to her feet, finding her balance, using the protection of the tree's girth behind her, run-limping as hard and fast as she could, teeth gritted, ankle screaming, throwing caution to the wind.

More gunfire.

Tree bark, like shrapnel, exploded all around her. It cut into her neck, back and the rear of her arms.

She couldn't stop now! They knew where she was! Up ahead, was the scrubland. She had to make it there!

Over the booming of the M4 behind her, she heard the chop, chop, chop of a helicopter. It had to be the Black Hawk! Looking ahead, up into the sky, she saw three black dots racing toward her. Shep was on one of them. What could they do? Would they be able to land in the scrub? Then charge up this hill at David's men coming down it? Or what? Willow's mind spun but she didn't know. Teeth clenched,

white-hot pain in her ankle, she lowered her head, running as hard as she could toward the open land.

A bullet sang past her ear. It sounded like a ‘CRRRAAAKKKK’!

Wincing, she redoubled her efforts, adrenaline pouring through her bloodstream, all her fight or flight hormones online, giving her speed and endurance to escape her enemy. The scrub was close! So close! She was running, running, almost there as one of the Black Hawk helicopters suddenly began its landing descent in a helluva hurry. Giving a cry, Willow waved her arms above her head just as she hit the scrubland, screaming at them, yelling, “I’m here! I’m here!”

Terror threatened to squash hope as she looked sideways and saw three soldiers in the scrub about half a mile to her left. They were running toward her with M4s up ready to fire. She dodged in and around the brush, stumbling, catching herself. She realized David had put his men in a pincer maneuver to find and trap her. Looking to her right, she gasped. Half a mile away, to her right, three more men appeared out of the woods, running toward her. They were coming fast from three directions to capture her.

NO!

She raced toward the Black Hawk, the slope much steeper, more vertical than before. The helo touched down a quarter mile ahead. The door opened and two men bailed out in full military gear. Black Hawk Chopper Two split off low and thundered to her left, heading for the men in the distance. Chopper Three banked off to her right, going after the other group. The hard, thumping rotor wash kicked up loose brush, dirt and grass a hundred feet into the air, whirling the mess around, momentarily hiding Willow from her enemies closing in on her. The loud engines of the helicopter that had disgorged the two men running up the hill toward her roared and the blades whirled faster and faster as it took off, clawing the air, rising into the sky, heading

straight up the mountain toward where the soldier was firing at her.

More bullets zinged past, dirt exploding in geysers around her. She tripped over a root and went flying headlong down the hill. Willow tucked her body into a ball, her arms around her drawn-up knees, bracing for the brutal impact. She slammed into the earth, rolling, hitting a huge, brushy tree, coming to a sharp stop.

“Stay down!”

Gasping, she remained flattened on the rocky ground beneath the bush. That was Shep’s voice! And as she looked up at the two men charging up toward her, she recognized him and Luke. Giving a little cry of relief, Willow hugged the earth, more bullets plowing through the bush above her. There was nowhere to hide! Nowhere to go! She saw the sweat on Shep’s frozen features, the hard line of his mouth as he lifted the M4, firing up the hill at her pursuer. Luke took the men to the right of her. Shep, one threat neutralized, then swung, taking on the men charging in from the left.

There was a storm of roaring, ear-splitting sound. Willow saw, to her relief, they had on Kevlar vests, making them far more protected than she was. The heavy sound and vibration pummeling her as the Black Hawk roared overhead added to the massive explosion of firepower all around her on the ground. The blasts from the rotors kicked up massive clouds of dirt, striking her, blinding her from the massive dust cloud.

Shep reached her first, dragging her around him, sheltering her from bullets, leaning over her.

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“Stay down! Crawl behind this tree trunk! Hide behind it!” he yelled above the roar.

Her knees were badly torn up, blood running down her legs as she scrambled and clawed, trying to get to her feet, wobbly, off balance. Shep gripped the fabric of her blouse, between her shoulder blades, lifting her up into a crouch. She wavered, weak and disoriented. He placed himself in front of her, a shield, shoving her behind the tree. He released his hold on her shirt, firing rapidly at the men running from the left toward them, their rifles winking. She ducked beneath the scratchy branches, zips and cracks screaming through them, then hit the deck again and crawled in on her belly, hands grasping for purchase on the black rocks until the width of the trunk somewhat protected her. Bark was flying, exploding, all around her. She jerked a look to her right, saw Shep kneel, M4 up, firing at the charging soldiers closing the distance on them.

She watched as the Black Hawk that had swung to the right suddenly plummeted downward, going for a swift landing. David’s soldiers began to fire up at it. But the helo was so damned fast coming in, gusts of over one-hundred mile an hour wind tearing at them from the whirling blades, that it knocked the enemy off their feet, scattering them like bowling ball pins. Six soldiers offloaded, bailing out of the helo, instantly firing at David’s soldiers still trying to get their feet under them. Within seconds, all three of them dropped, dead. Gasping, her eyes rounding, Willow sobbed in relief. Shep leaped to his feet, going in front of the tree, and flung himself prone on the ground, firing up the hill. From where Willow saw at least three new arrivals charging down at their position, firing wildly. Bullets were singing everywhere. She ducked, keeping her head behind the trunk of the tree, praying that Shep wouldn’t be killed.

To her left, she heard the slow, consistent firing of an M4 and knew it had to be Luke. Only SEALs fired like that. And when they did, even if they were running full speed, they hit their targets. She couldn't see anything through the thick branches, but suddenly, the firing stopped. The third Black Hawk disappeared to her left, but the branches didn't allow her to see much at all of it after that. It sounded as if it had landed! There was no further gunfire. Had Luke dispensed with all three of David's soldiers, first? It wouldn't surprise Willow. SEALs were known for their deadly accuracy.

Shep saw the last man fall up the slope. The only sound he heard was from the two Black Hawks, both on the ground now, blades whirling fast, and he saw the general's men running to the unmoving bodies of David's soldiers. A sudden movement caught his attention. There, no more than a quarter mile away, he spotted Tefere David. He was running away from the area! Racing between the trees toward higher ground and the airstrip, trying not to be seen by the general's men. David was trying to escape!

Shep had no way to tell anyone in time. He leaped to his feet, yelling to Willow, "Stay where you are! I'm going after David!" and he dug the toes of his boots into the rocky surface as he sped off.

Willow gasped. She jerked her head around, peering between two thick branches, catching sight of the tall, lean thug. He was running like a gazelle, leaping over small logs, heading out of sight of the two zones now under friendly control where his own soldiers were presently either dead or being captured. Realizing no one saw David except Shep, she hurriedly pushed and wriggled her way out from beneath the bush. Getting to her feet, she swayed, caught herself and took shaky steps around the bush, watching Shep running hard after David. Looking around, she realized she wasn't within shouting distance of either Luke or the other soldiers. Had anyone else seen Shep race away? Hurrying around the bush, to her left, she spotted Luke a good quarter of a mile away, working with the general's soldiers, going through the pockets of David's dead soldiers for any useable intel.

There was no way to reach him in time! And then, she remembered her iPhone! Shrugging out of her go bag, she set it on the ground. With shaking hands, she unzipped it, struggled for precious seconds to find the cell phone, and grabbed it. Standing up, she punched in Luke's number and prayed it would work despite the broken screen.

"Yeah?" Luke growled.

"Luke! It's me, Willow! Shep is chasing David! He's up to your right, halfway up the hill! He's trying to make an escape between the airstrip and this second Black Hawk to the right of me! Can you help?"

"Hold one sec," he said.

She saw him race about a hundred feet away from the other men, looking in that direction.

"Yeah, got him!"

"Can you help Shep?" she pleaded hoarsely.

"Yes! I'll also call the general. He's landed up on the airstrip. He has six men with him. I'll give him the info. Thanks! You just sta..."

Her phone went dead. She realized its power had died. Looking up, she saw Luke on his own phone, presumably now filling in the general. Twisting around, she saw Shep weaving in and out of the trees getting closer and closer to their nemesis. David would blind fire indiscriminately behind him with the M4, and was shooting on the run to boot, so he was widely missing Shep... so far. Feeling her heart tear open with fear for Shep's life, she realized there was nothing else she could do. Breathing in raspy gulps, pressing her hand against her heaving chest, she watched the race

between the two men. In a matter of a minute, they would disappear around the hill, and she'd lose sight of them. Wanting to cry, wanting to help him, feeling horribly useless, unable to protect Shep, she didn't want to stay put. There were no more of David's soldiers firing at anyone. They were either dead or being zip-tied.

The Black Hawk that had landed to her right was taking off! The blades whirling faster and faster. She saw Luke leap on board, the door sliding shut. Within seconds, the bird was up and thundering laterally up the slope, its pitch nearly vertical, nose skimming just above the ground, tail rotor high in the air, blowing a hurricane of debris out behind it. The chopper passed thirty feet above her, the rotor wash knocking her on her butt. Willow hit the ground with a loud 'omph!' The vibration and wind currents from the powerful black helo thrummed through and around her. Pebbles and dirt slammed into the exposed skin of her face, neck and arms. She choked, scrambled to her feet in awe as the bird gained altitude, hot on the trail of Shep and David. It was barely fifty feet off the ground! It took some great flying to do that, and she knew it. Luke was on that bird. That made her feel better. She put her hand above her eyes, shading them as the sun rose on the eastern horizon, her heart hammering. Every cell of her being screamed that Shep survive this! She began to limp in the same direction the Black Hawk was flying. There was no way she wasn't going to try and find Shep!

Shep ran hard, his whole being focused on Tefere David up ahead, weaving, ducking and bobbing, keeping up with the Somali who was like a graceful gazelle, running and never tiring. He could feel the tightening of his calf muscles, knowing that he wasn't in the kind of shape that his mortal enemy was, but what gave him the endurance, the drive, was the knowledge that if he didn't capture or kill this bastard, he'd keep going after Willow. David was like whack-a-mole; they'd foiled him, and weeks later he'd popped up again, boarding Willow's aircraft, trying to kidnap her again. David would not stop trying until he was successful. That is what drove Shep to call on every bit of strength, every reserve his body knew of, to catch up with him. Not caring if David killed him or not, Shep raced forward, slowly decreasing the gap

between them.

Behind him and to his left, he suddenly heard all kinds of gunfire, the whapping of Black Hawk blades, shouts and more firing. No time to look. He HAD to get David! The land was changing as they moved around the hill. It was nothing but thick woods and Shep knew no helo could land to help him. If these had been DAP, Direct Air Penetrator, Black Hawks? They could have found David by infrared and drop a hellfire missile on the bastard, blasting him into oblivion. But it wasn't a DAP; it was merely a transport helo with no firepower on board, except for the men it carried.

Suddenly, David went down, the M4 flying out of his hands. He'd burst out of the thick undergrowth and come out in a small clearing, a circle of grass, and had tripped badly over something unseen.

Shep raced toward him, gripping his rifle, holding it up. He saw the man flounder on his back, as if stunned by the fall. David's rifle was too far away for him to reach. Gritting his teeth, Shep surged forward, his whole existence pinned on the Somali struggling to turn over. If only he could get to him first!

The toe of his boot slammed into a hidden root. Grunting, Shep suddenly flew forward, his own M4 sailing out of his hands. The power of the hit was so hard that it flipped him over and he landed on his back, the air knocked out of him.

Stunned, Shep could hardly breath. He lay there trying to gasp, like a fish out of water. No! This couldn't be happening! Where had his M4 gone? He saw David get to his hands and knees, glaring at him, no more than twelve feet away. He was grinning lethally at Shep as he started crawling toward him.

Dammit! Shep grunted and forced himself to roll over on his side.

Getting himself to his hands and feet, he realized David had a deep head wound.

Blood trickled down his jaw, dripping into the grass as he moved closer. Shep glanced frantically around. Where was his rifle? He couldn't find it!

David got to his feet, wavering, wobbling, hands out to keep from falling again, still walking one unsteady foot at a time toward him, death in his eyes.

Shep saw his enemy draw a long, wickedly curved knife from a sheath on the side of his belt. He instantly recognized it as a trademark weapon these terrorists carried: A scimitar knife blade. It was a sharp, deadly crescent, twenty inches in length, three inches wide. The blade glinted dully, looking well-used. Rolling over, Shep unsnapped his own knife: a Marine K-bar, a lethal, straight-bladed, seven-inch knife that could saw flesh on its way in and on its way out of an enemy's body with the serrated razor teeth along half its spine. He gripped the knife hard by its leather handle. Cursing, he used almost every ounce of his energy to get to his feet, still gasping, still trying to catch his breath. He was just at the rim of the clearing of ankle length grass. For whatever reason, David did not turn and run toward his M4 that had been flipped into the center of the circle, barely visible in the heavy grass. Maybe he didn't see it? Couldn't find it? Shep was relieved in one way; never bring a knife to a gunfight.

A snarl lifted David's bloody lip. "You are going to die, American pig!"

Shep had one chance only to make him a liar: A long blade was good at a distance in that the knife bearer had to lift his arm high and away from his body to make the kind of sweeping cut the scimitar blade was made for. It was not a stabbing knife; it was a cutting knife. His K-bar was only seven inches long against the twenty inches of the curved scimitar blade. But his Marine Corps combat knife, and the long years he'd carried it over in Afghanistan, trained in its use, were all it came down to now as he walked toward David, eyes on his chest.

Shep's stride was confident, suddenly steady, and he ate up the distance between

himself and David, who stood grinning fiendishly, slowly raising his scimitar blade, ready to sweep it downward, and cut through the skin, flesh, tendon and bone of Shep's body.

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Shep knew the distance he needed. One chance. Just one. If it did it wrong? He was going to die. Most likely, be decapitated in the sweep of that blade David held so powerfully and confidently, upraised, ready for him to step into the Circle of Death where a blade could take the opponent's life. In those last, vital seconds, he moved his hand from the leather handle, turning the knife around, blade pointed toward himself, his hand in a handshake position, closing around the spine of the K-Bar. He wouldn't have time to take aim.

Nine feet. The knife's blade caressed the palm of his hand.

Eight feet. Shep locked his wrist, keeping it in the proper straight position needed to send the K-bar's point straight and true into David's body.

Seven feet. He pulled back his arm, eyes still nailing his enemy's chest. He heard David laughing, almost hysterically, as he lifted his foot, starting to take the step forward into the Circle of Death.

Six feet. Shep darted his forearm and released the knife, the blade slipping from his hand, cutting the air at high speed, cartwheeling end over end. The blade plunged into David's chest with ferocity, five inches deep into his jerking body.

David's eyes bulged as the knife pierced his heart and sent him flailing backwards. He let loose of his own knife, a croak of surprise in his throat, disbelief in his face as he continued to stumble back, arms flailing like a windmill.

Shep halted, holding the man's eyes that had first been filled with killing lust, now turned to disbelief at the K-Bar sticking from his chest, its steel blade deep in his

heart muscle. Standing there, breathing hard, Shep watched the Somali's hands flutter over the K-bar's handle, but to no end. His legs crumpled beneath him, and he crashed to the ground. Dead.

“Holy shit!”

Shep turned, seeing Luke running up behind him, M4 ready to fire. There was disbelief written all over his face.

The SEAL skidded to a halt, staring at the unmoving enemy that had plagued all of them for so long. Then, his stare of disbelief moved to Shep. “Where the HELL did you learn how to throw a knife like that?”

Wiping the sweat off his face, Shep said, “When I was in Afghanistan, I ran around with the Marines on base. Their Recons taught me how to use a K-Bar, and how to kill with it. No one even comes close to them for knife skills.” A slight grin tugging at his mouth, he watched Luke shake his head, eyes on the blade's deadly placement. “Holy shit!” he said again. “Right through his heart. You shoulda signed up for the SEALs.”

“You SEALs must know how to throw a knife, right?”

“Well,” Luke stumbled, “we learn how to FIGHT with a knife, not throw it.”

Shep walked over and picked up the scimitar blade. “Pity. Maybe you ought to invite some Recon Marines over to your training base in Coronado, to show you ALL the uses of a combat knife, huh?”

He dropped the scimitar next to where David had crumpled, where it belonged.

Shaking his head, Luke muttered, “You're friggin' something else. I've never seen

anything like what I just saw. And I wouldn't believe it either unless I did see it with my own two eyes." He pushed his hand through his short, damp hair. "You took a helluva risk. You know that don't you?"

Shep leaned down, jerking his K-bar out of David's limp body. He wiped the knife off in the grass, getting rid of the blood and viscera. Sliding it back into the sheath on the left side of his body, he snapped it into place and turned, giving Luke a very serious look. "Yeah. I'm gonna have to email my Recon friends and tell them what happened. They deserve to know their hard work paid off." His voice lowered with quiet fury. "This is one bastard of that terrorist group that isn't going to harm anyone else. Ever again."

Luke just shook his head, disbelief still etched in his expression.

"Looks like the general has this under control. I heard some gunfire."

"One of the Toyota drivers tried to run," Luke said. "But that ended fast. All the men David had along are either dead or up on the airstrip in zip ties. They've also taken some prisoners who threw down their weapons and held up their hands the instant the helo landed. The other Toyota driver is in zip ties, too."

"Let's go back and get Willow. I need to make sure she's all right," Shep said, frowning.

"Roger that," Luke replied, taking one more look at David and then turning and starting to trot down the hill with Shep. "She's been through hell."

"Tell me about it," Shep growled, wanting nothing more than to take her into his arms, hold her, keep her safe and tell her how much he loved her.

CHAPTER 17

With every step, Willow bit back a groan. It didn't matter what the price of pain would be, she aimed herself at the hill above her that Shep and David had disappeared behind. Her jeans were blood-soaked at the knees, the tears in the fabric flapping in the air with every step, and she knew she had cut the hell out of herself. She carried her .45, locked and loaded, not sure if all of David's men had been captured yet or not. Was Shep dead or alive? Tears burned in her eyes, and she gulped, willing them away.

Two men emerged around the curve of the hill.

Willow anchored. Shep! And Luke! They saw her! In moments, both of them were trotting toward her. A sob caught in her throat, and she swayed to a stop, unchambering the bullet from the .45, safing and placing the gun in her go bag. By the time she'd straightened and shrugged it back across her shoulders, Shep had stopped trotting and was sprinting toward her as best he could with the M4 slung across his shoulder, the look on his face one of utter relief. As he neared, she smiled brokenly, holding out her hands toward him.

In seconds, he was there, wrapping his strong arms around her, hauling her against him, squeezing her so hard the breath whooshed out of her. Sliding her arms around his broad shoulders, her still shocked senses amplified everything: she could smell the sweat on him, the dampness of his shirt beneath her cheek, the perspiration on his jaw and his own cheek against her brow.

".... Shep!" she managed, burying her face against his chest as he gently eased his grip, keeping his hands around her waist, making sure she was steady enough to remain on her feet.

"I'm here," he choked out, cupping her jaw, his gaze naked with terror and relief. "You're safe, Willow... safe. I love you so damned much," and he leaned down, capturing her lips, kissing her hard, drinking in her breath and trading his own with

hers, the taste of life, the love they shared tunneling through both of them.

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Everything halted for Willow. She no longer sensed anything else around her; didn't feel the warming breeze that came with the sun rising, heating the ruddy Ethiopian soil around them, didn't hear the birds flying overhead, chirping madly above them. All she wanted was Shep's mouth cherishing hers. His calloused, work-worn hands framed her face. The love he held for her alone was broadcast with every touch, every punctuated moist breath against her cheek, telling her how much he treasured her. His kiss was hungry and needful, but then, as if realizing her condition, he softened his mouth against hers. Within his arms she felt so fragile that she might break. How injured was she?

They separated slightly. Willow felt dizzy by her relief that Shep was alive. She stepped back, still in his grip, whispering, "I love you so much... so much... I thought you might die..."

He groaned. "Willow, I was terrified for your life..." He stopped. Looking deeply into her eyes, he rasped unsteadily, "We were meant for one another. And if we didn't know it before? We know it now..."

A sob tore from her as she sank back against him, his body strong and supportive whereas she felt like she was falling apart, piece by piece. It felt so good to be able to put her arms around his torso, squeeze and hold him, his one hand around her waist, and the other ranging slowly up and down her back, as if to sooth away the terror that still inhabited her. Willow lost track of time. Shep was the center of her universe. Eventually, she became aware of the pain in her knees and awkwardly stepped out of his arms.

"You're pretty cut up," Shep said worriedly, holding her arm as he scowled and

examined her bloodied knees.

“They hurt like hell.” Willow saw Luke trot up to them, his face glistening with sweat, his expression grim with concern.

“Are you all right, Willow?” he asked, coming to a halt, rapidly assessing her from head to toe.

“I’m getting there, Luke.”

“The general landed the helo up at the airstrip,” Luke told her. “Let’s get you up there. Your next stop is the emergency room at the Bahir Dar hospital. He’ll fly you in. Land right on the helipad next to it.”

“Sounds good, Luke. Then? All I want to do is go home afterward,” Willow whispered wearily. She glanced over at Shep. “And be with you... that’s all I’ll ever need...”

“How do you feel now?” Shep asked Willow. There were waterproof bandages around each of her injured knees and she’d been able to take a long, hot, luxurious bath to soak all the soreness and stiffness out of her body, first thing after arriving at her condo.

Willow lifted her lashes, taking his hand to step carefully out of the large tub. “So much better...” He slowly eased out of the tub and onto the soft pink rug beside it.

Shep watched her closely. Willow had swollen, dark-purple-and-blue bruise lines across her shoulders and abdomen from when the harness had bit deeply into her flesh during the crash-landing of the Otter. That harness had saved her life. She

would have at least been stunned without it, and David's men would have had her, an option far worse than merely dying in the crash. Later, she had fallen several times during her run to escape, Shep had found out, her knees taking the worst of it. Thankfully, the Ethiopian doctor in the ER told her that yes, they were cut and deeply bruised, but she had not sustained any lasting injury to either of them. That was the good news. However, it was going to take a lot of stitches and surgical tape to close them and two more weeks before she could walk unassisted or even bend them much.

He took a fluffy lavender terry-cloth towel and brought it across her shoulders for warmth. The bathroom was small, and steamy from her long, luxurious soak in the tub. She thanked him, drawing the towel around her. He took a second towel from the rack and began to gently dry off her arms and hands, then softly patted her bruised and swollen shoulders, breasts and belly. Worried by how exhausted she looked, he quickly patted dry her hips, that beautiful butt of hers, her long, long legs, and finished up with her feet. Placing the towel aside, he brought a cushioned stool over so that she could sit down.

"Ohhh," she sighed. Slowly sitting straight legged, one hand gripping the rim of the sink, the other tight on Shep's thick forearm, she eased the pressure off her knees. "That's sooo much better."

He took the towel from around her shoulders, patting dry the bits he'd missed. He lifted a silky purple robe off the hook behind the door and crouched to help her into it. Kneeling, Shep brought the robe together and gently tied the sash for her. "There," he murmured, looking up, seeing her eyes dark with fatigue. "Tell you what," he said, rising. "Would you like to go lay down for a while? Just rest? Because you're barely keeping your eyes open, Willow."

"If you'll lay down with me?"

"Let me take a shower, first? Get out of these dirty clothes? Then I'll come and join

you?” and he trailed his fingers through the unbrushed hair he’d just washed for her. Picking up a comb, he gently eased the snags out of her red tresses, and in no time, he’d gotten them somewhat tamed and glinting beautifully around her face, neck and shoulders.

“I’d like that,” she whispered. “I feel bludgeoned, Shep. Like someone hit me in the head with a sixteen-pound sledgehammer.”

“Adrenaline crash combined with your reaction to the Otter crash,” he reassured her. Standing, he placed the comb on the counter. “Tell you what: I’m going to carry you into the bedroom. You’ve walked and run enough today those damaged knees of yours.”

She smiled a little. “That would be nice,” she agreed softly.

He carefully lifted his warrior woman into his arms, placing her against his body, absorbing the sensation of her slender arms slipping around his shoulders.

Willow sighed his name, and rested her brow against his shoulder and jaw as he carried her from the bathroom to their bedroom.

Looking at the clock, it was 3:00 p.m. So much had happened in such a short amount of time. Shep inhaled her feminine scent and the spicy cinnamon fragrance of the shampoo he’d used on her hair earlier, strands still damp and tickling his jaw.

Pushing open the door with the toe of his boot, he carried her to the bed that she’d made in the morning of this fateful, nearly fatal, day before leaving for work. After he posited her on the mattress, her head coming to rest on the pillow, he brought the blue silk coverlet over her so she wouldn’t be cold. “Close your eyes, Willow.” He caressed her hair and shoulder, watching her red lashes drift downward. She was already asleep, but he wasn’t surprised, knowing how a severe adrenaline rush

affected even the hardest. His hand moved down her sleeve, silently grateful that she was alive. Best of all? She would recover; he could love her fiercely for the rest of their lives together.

Quietly, Shep left the room, leaving the door a bit ajar, and went to the bathroom to finally get cleaned up himself. He wanted to take the smell of war off him. And as long as they remained in Ethiopia, war was always nearby. It was something they would always have to remain alert to.

Willow awoke with a start. She felt Shep's arm around her waist, his body molded against her back and legs, his head rested on her pillow beside hers. It seemed to be evening, and she lifted her head. The clock on her dresser, opposite the bed, read nine p.m. Shocked, she slowly eased away from Shep, sitting up, pushing a mass of now-dry hair behind her shoulders, and straightening out her rumpled silk robe.

"Hey," Shep mumbled, "no need to go anywhere..."

She turned, watching him drowsily roll onto his back, rubbing his face with his hands. There was a light-blue blanket across him. Under it, he was naked, and beautiful to her. And he was hers. "I woke you... sorry...."

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He dropped his hands from his face, rolling onto his side, one arm behind his head as he studied her in the low light of the room. “I’m not. Did you sleep well?”

“I must have,” she croaked, clearing her throat, trying to get her bearings. “I didn’t even know when you came to bed.”

“About an hour after I carried you in here. You were already asleep. If the person gets to sleep as long as they want after a trauma, the body uses that time to recover from the event. That’s what you did.”

Pushing her fingers through her dried hair, feeling the silkiness of it, he smiled at her. She murmured, “I don’t remember you coming in, Shep. I must have been dead to the world. I do feel marginally better.”

“It’s going to take you weeks to recover from the shock, Willow. But you will recover... Oh, just so you know, after I took a shower, I also had to send Luke a preliminary written report on what happened. He forwarded it to Delos and Artemis.”

Groaning, Willow said, “You told them I crashed their Otter. Right?”

“Yeah, I had too. But wait, they’ve already replied to, and...”

“Are they angry? Upset?”

“No. They’re relieved that you’re alive and going to live. They understood why you did it. They’re sending two replacement Otters to us. One is coming from Kenya, the other from the Sudan. Two male pilots on board each one. They’ll arrive tomorrow

morning, and I'll be able to get back on track with the building schedule at Addis Zemen."

"What about me? And Dev? We'll get to fly one of them, won't we?"

He gave her a lazy grin and moved beside her, bringing his arm around her shoulders. "No worries there. One set of pilots will be transferred back to the Sudan. A replacement Otter will be flown into their facility there this coming week. Artemis wants two planes here. You and Dev will get one of them."

"They're leaving the other two pilots here, then?"

Nodding, he said, "Yes, and I'm glad of it. You were running into FAA regulation limits on how much you could fly in one day, and the charity doesn't want to run afoul of those regs." He moved his hand lightly across her shoulder and upper arm. "Look at it this way? You'll have some downtime. You were getting run ragged, Willow."

"I suppose you're right, she agreed, leaning into his body, resting her head against his shoulder. "Does Dev know all this?"

"Yes, I gave her and Ginny the gist of what the charity had decided to do."

"How are they doing health wise?"

"Better. The doctor came over this morning, gave them some prescriptions and I heard from Luke, around four, that they were sleeping peacefully. Their fevers had dropped. The doctor agreed that they got a bad case of food poisoning. Luke himself is tired, but fine. He came through this better than anyone."

Placing her hand against her chest, she whispered, "Because of his SEAL training.

And you because of your knife training.”

“Yes, on both counts.”

“It’s good to hear Dev and Ginny are feeling better.”

“Delos is also sending us two more security officers, so that both Otters and pilots have someone on board to protect them at all times, no matter where or when they fly.”

“That’s even better. Was it ever a mistake for me to get someone from the foreman’s workers to come with me this morning. I had no idea Zere could be one of David’s soldiers.” She shook her head, giving him a grim look of apology.

“Hey, no second guessing here. We had a gap in our security, and no one realized it until it happened. Ginny and Dev couldn’t help falling sick with food poisoning, but we didn’t have backup for security to make up the difference, either. That’s what got us in trouble. From now on? We’ll have a security officer at the warehouse when shipments come in and leave, and one at the airport on stand-by, in case one of the one of the Otters’ security people gets sick or something. We’ll always have a third person ready to step in, to ensure you have someone who will protect your safety while flying those supplies to us.”

“That’s a lot of money they’re spending on this effort, Shep,” she said, frowning.

“The way they see this gig, we have almost a dozen buildings going up in a dozen different locations to create adequate safety for our charities here in this country. That’s going to take us nearly a year to complete, so it’s not a wasted effort, no matter the extra cost. We don’t know who will take David’s place, but power hates a vacuum, so I’m sure someone will step up to take over the five hundred soldiers he had here in Ethiopia. We don’t know who, but what’s for certain is that someone

will,” he growled, shaking his head. “Terrorism is alive and well all over the world, but really most dangerous to people like us who work in third world countries.”

She sighed, kissing his cheek. “And all we’re trying to do is help them out.”

He slid his hand up and down her upper arm. “Yeah... just like Afghanistan, except here in Ethiopia, they are better at trying to improve people’s lives. A lot of their people are already educated, and that is a good thing.”

“True,” she murmured. “Maybe that’s why Dev and I like being here. The people are great, they are kind, and they help each other out. It isn’t always like that everywhere else. They are WORTH helping, Shep. To me, at least, they are.”

“Me, too,” he agreed. “There’re always bad apples in every country in the world. It doesn’t matter if it’s first, second or third world. We were well briefed on what it would be like coming over here, that we could encounter dangerous situations. The charity has tried to plug the holes on what they thought might happen, but until you have boots on the ground, you don’t know the details of what ELSE could take place and cause us havoc.”

She snorted. “And it’s the details that can get us killed. Like they almost did me, this morning,” and she shook her head, trading an unhappy glance with Shep.

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“Don’t be hard on yourself. When I talked to Luke earlier, he pinpointed more of the problem, as well as a resolution for it. As soon as we got off the Black Hawk at the airport, he hitched a ride over to the warehouse to talk with the foreman. He’s creating a system where every worker hired by the foreman is not only known, first name and last, but will also have to pass a security background check run on them. And if they can’t find out more, then they don’t hire the man. Those that make it through will also have to wear proper insignia showing their clearance level at all times. We don’t need any more terrorist ringers slipping through and causing us issues.”

“That’ll go a long way,” Willow said, nodding. Her stomach growled and Shep turned, grinning at her. “Guess I’m hungry.”

“Are you?”

She gave him a classic Willow-brand one-eyebrow-raised look. “Now, that’s a loaded question and you know it, Porter.”

Chuckling, he said, “I was just teasing you. I mean food, like on the table. I can throw us something together and we can eat.”

She smiled up at him. “You’re always a pot-stirrer, Porter.”

He released her and stood up. “Guilty as charged. You want to stay in that robe, or you want some real clothes?”

“Real clothes,” she said, pointing to the closet. “Can you grab me a pair of khaki

cargo pants and a pullover tee? You choose the colors. I'm fine with not hobbling around on these achy knees of mine more than I have to."

Opening the closet, he said, "The doctor said twenty-one days before you can fly again."

Wrinkling her nose, she nodded. "I'll go out of my mind with nothing to do around here."

"Well," he said, choosing a pink tee and light gray cargo pants out of the closet, "I have a nice little apartment, air conditioned, in Bahir Dar. Would you be interested in coming up there and staying with me for that time frame? The apartment is in a safe, walled area with a very nice courtyard, a pond, lots of trees and flowers, along with a nice, flat path. I think a little exercise daily on those knees might be good. What do you think?"

"I like that idea," she said, taking the clothes from him, and with Shep's patient help, she eventually got dressed. She had some funky-patterned tennis shoes, which were flat and easy to walk in, and he eased them onto her feet and tied the laces for her. Reaching out, she whispered, "Thanks... it's sort of nice to be taken care of."

He lifted his chin, giving her a warm look. "I kinda like it, too, Willow." He rose, holding out his hand to her. "Let's see how your knees react?"

She nodded and hesitantly stood, feeling the stretch of the surgical tape across several deep cuts that had to be stitched closed. "How about I put my arm around your waist, and you put your arm around my shoulder?"

"Anything you want, Angel."

Her heart swelled with such love for him. "I've never seen this side of you, Shep, the

mother-in-disguise, nurturing me. Making me feel safe.”

He walked her slowly out of the bedroom and down the hall. “Funny,” he murmured, “I was thinking the same thing. Maybe we’re changing for the better?”

“I think so. I like it. A lot.”

“I do, too, Willow.”

As they approached the table, he pulled out a chair for her. “You sit, and I’ll continue to nurture you,” he teased.

Laughing a little, she sat down slowly, some pain drifting up her thighs. The doctor had given her some Ibuprofen for the pain, and she thought she might take some. Shep scooted the chair closer to the table for her. “Seriously? Would you like to spend the next three weeks with me up at the job site? You won’t be as bored.”

“I’d like that. Maybe this is the good thing that comes out of something like this. I’ve never really seen you working. Never even saw what you did as a Seabee at our base in Afghanistan. I was always flying missions.”

Going to the refrigerator, he pulled out cold fried chicken, some dinner rolls and coleslaw. Placing it all on the counter, he said, “You might find it interesting. You’re mechanically minded and that’s what civil engineering is all about: mechanics.”

“Well,” she said, “since I can’t fly for a while, I think I’ll like staying at your home away from home.”

As it turned out, Willow had to wait nearly four weeks for her knees to heal up to the

point where she could bend them without pain or stiffness. The first week with Shep had been one of quiet frustration for her because she couldn't just walk anywhere anytime she wanted. But that was a minor nuisance compared to the upside: he'd go off to work and she'd have the lovely little apartment with its wonderful, life-giving air conditioning all to herself. Every morning, she would carefully walk the little path as advertised, not wanting to open up one of those deep, but slowly healing, cuts in her knees. And after he left at dawn to begin his day's work, she would sit outside on a chair in the coolness of the morning and enjoy the beauty of the surrounding flower beds. Best of all, the birds sang at dawn, and that always lifted her spirits.

Dev kept herself busy on her laptop, helping to coordinate the new pilots and the two Otter airplanes that were taking over the workhorse routine of the many daily flights. But with two planes, they were each only flying four or five times a day, and for Dev, that was a relief. Willow would give anything to be in the cockpit again but decided to stop grumping about it and try to be patient. Her day always got better when Shep got home, sometimes well past dinnertime. His days were long, involved and demanding. She began to see how exhausted he was then. She had never realized his job was him sitting at the top of a pyramid of endless decisions that only he, and nobody else, could make. Everything always stopped at his door. He carried the weight of the entire project on his broad shoulders.

Without fail, he would bring dinner home for the two of them every night. And he always brought her desserts that she loved, small tokens, she felt, of his love for her. She was spoiled with such attention. Every night, he would ask how her day went. And only after they'd discussed the ups and downs of her healing, would he tell her about his own. There were enormous decisions to be made, millions of dollars in the mix, and she found herself in awe of how he juggled such responsibility. Toward the end of her healing period, he took her out one evening to a restaurant and then to a small hill overlooking the construction site. There were bright lights surrounding the entire area. For the first time, she saw the layers of reinforced barricades she had flown in the materials to build. Security guards were on duty twenty-four hours a day.

The people of this small town must have heaved many a sigh of relief that their children were to be safe going to school, instead of the fear of the little ones being stolen away by sex-traders.

By the thirtieth day, her knees were well on their way to being back to normal. Willow had been industrious that day, cleaning, sweeping, dusting, and thinking that usually she would hate such things. But the fact that her knees were almost healed, and she could bend, flex and crouch, made her grateful. No longer was housework a drudge. After the enforced jail time of being hardly able to do anything, it was a joy just to move her body again like she used to.

There was a rhythm to Shep's return from work, and this evening followed it: He arrived at sunset and kissed her hello, asked how she was doing, and then went to get a cool shower and some clean clothes. In the meantime, she set the table and put some of the wildflowers from the path she walked daily into a small blue pottery vase. She'd been able to bend all the way down and cut their stems with a pair of scissors she'd brought along for that purpose. They were a bright spot of color on the small, handmade wooden table and she smiled, knowing Shep would appreciate them.

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She heard the door to the bedroom where they slept open, and she knew Shep was done showering and changing. In some ways, Willow felt as if she'd traded lives with someone else or was now in another dimension. Every night, they slept together. Because of her knees, it wasn't prudent to go all the way, but she enjoyed their kisses, his tenderness, and the many changes that he'd made for her. Those nights were gifts to her.

"Got something for you," he said, handing her a brightly colored box.

She smiled. "Thanks. Dinner's ready. Can I open it afterward?"

"Sure," and he pulled her chair out for her to sit on.

"What is it?"

He grinned and sat down opposite her, opening the bright-yellow cotton napkin before him. "You've always been the curious one," he said, passing her the bowl of salad.

"Guilty," Willow said, warming beneath his gaze. She lifted some salad onto her plate with a pair of tongs. "Maybe I should open the box now? Instead of later?"

He laughed and shrugged. "Up to you, Angel. It's yours. IF you want it," he teased mildly.

Giving him a nod, she said, "I want." She picked up the box and opened it. Her eyes widened and she snapped a look at Shep. "Is this what I think it is?" she whispered,

suddenly emotional.

“It is.”

She stared at the engagement ring. Only it wasn't a diamond. It had a green gemstone instead, in a gold setting. “Shep...”

“Is it too soon?” he asked quietly, becoming serious, watching her stare into the box.

Flummoxed, she whispered unsteadily, “I don't know... we've been through so much in such a short, concentrated span of time...”

“Then,” he said gently, “put it away and we'll approach this another time?”

She stared at him, her heart bursting over such love and thoughtfulness. “I—wasn't expecting this, Shep...”

“Then,” he said, “let's put the box away for now. Instead, what I'd like to do tonight, if it feels right to you, is love you, Willow.”

Taking a deep breath, she felt her whole body say a big ‘YES!’ to his suggestion. No one was a better lover than Shep, in her experience at least. Lifting her chin, she said, “I'd like that... I'm more than ready and I think you are too.”

He smiled a little. “You could say that, Willow.”

She couldn't stop staring at the engagement ring. “It's so beautiful...”

“It's an emerald,” he said, “not quite the spring-green color of your eyes, but it's close. You really like it?”

“I love the man who chose it for me,” she managed, her voice tearful sounding. Slipping on the ring, she said, “I’m going to keep this. I don’t want to give it back to you, Shep...”

Later that night, Shep gently drew Willow up against him in bed. He leaned over, capturing her mouth, giving her all the love he held in his heart. Relieved that she’d accepted the engagement ring, he felt even more hopeful that, if they kept working at their relationship, it would do nothing but get better with time. And Willow was focused on working through her own issues, as he was his. It wasn’t a one-way street and Shep figured that, with maturity, they’d both learned valuable lessons that would serve them well moving forward. As their lips melded and slid across one another, she hungrily returned his exploring, heated kiss. She was so brave. So courageous. And he loved her with his life.

Easing from her mouth, Shep drowned in her aroused gaze as she searched his narrowed eyes. “You’re mine,” he growled, cupping her breast, feeling her flesh tighten in his palm. “Now,” Shep said thickly, kissing her temple, inhaling her fragrance. “And forever...” Shep moved his thumb across the hardening nipple as he again curved his mouth hotly against her wet lips.

A soft moan vibrated through Willow as he teased her. Abruptly, her hips moved against his. Willow was dazed by his sweet assault upon her. Shep smiled down at her. A sense of gratefulness that he could give Willow this gift of his love coursed through him, a buffer against the violent world that had nearly taken her life only a month before.

Lifting her, Shep eased her on top of him, her favorite position. With her knees freshly healed, she made the movement with ease. He already knew she was wet and ready by the fierce, burning look in her eyes. She was his woman warrior. His to love. His to protect. His to give pleasure to. He settled her over his erection, a low sound of pleasure catching in her exposed throat as her hips captured his.

“Take me,” he growled. Because Willow was a fearless lover. She liked sex just as much as he did and Shep saw her give him a very hunter-like look as she eased firmly against his erection, sliding slowly against him.

He groaned and slipped his hands around her flared hips, wanting to be within her. She shared his need, and lifted a little, moving forward to capture him. She sheathed slowly down upon him, allowing her body to adjust to the motion. Willow was wet and hot and he heard her groan with him, her head tipping back, again that animal-like raw sound of pleasure escaping her lips. Shep felt how ready she was. Willow was so close to orgasm already that he brought her firmly down upon him and began quick, short thrusts, watching her start to fly apart with the rhythm he’d established for them. Her hands frantically opened and closed against his chest wall, her breath coming in sharp, sudden gasps, her breasts tight, nipples hard, begging to be teased.

It was as if all the danger of the recent past was making her frantic and starved for him in a new way. Sex meant life. Living. Not dying. Shep felt her tight, wet channel gripping him and he gritted his teeth, close to exploding. Her breath came in ragged, small sounds, little cries arcing up her throat. Oh yeah, Willow was ready. And he made sure to give her as much pleasure as she wanted, lifting his hips, gripping hers, bringing more pressure down on him, fully engaging that swollen, throbbing knot of nerves at her entrance. Seconds later, he felt Willow suddenly freeze, a cry tearing out of her, fingers digging deeply into his upper arms as the orgasm erupted and rolled through her with throbbing, deep, pleasurable contractions.

Shep knew he could not stop himself from coming. He didn’t want to just yet. But every time with Willow was better. More intense. Her orgasms were long, making her weep with satisfaction. And then, Shep felt that familiar zing of white-hot heat roaring down his spine, making him growl as he kept moving his hips, trying to continue her rapture. That streak of boiling fire slammed into his tightened balls and exploded out of him. He was lost in the raw, consuming heat, feeling Willow’s body contract tightly around him. Unable to move, his breath ragged, eyes tightly shut as

he gripped her hips, Shep flew into that same cauldron of gratification with Willow. It didn't get any better than this. Not ever.

Willow groaned his name and melted against Shep's body afterward. She was breathing raggedly, her heart pounding, her body radiating with raw fulfillment while the throbbing ripples kept on surging throughout her. She felt the sharp rise and fall of his chest, his pounding heart against her ear. Nuzzling his jaw, she whispered, "That was off the charts..." Willow felt him chuckle, a rumble-like thunder rolling deeply through his chest.

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“It was great, Angel,” Shep managed, his voice hoarse. He threaded his fingers through her slightly curled hair. “I like what we have...”

Nodding, finding it difficult to think, just feel, Willow absorbed him on every level of her being. He was strong, his muscles hard and reflexive as she moved her fingers slowly up and down his ribcage. Shep was so alive. So vital. She lay there upon him, eyes closed, dampness shared between their heated, perspiring bodies. Willow was consumed with love for him. He was a warrior, but always tender toward her in moments like these. He had always loved her as if she were the most beautiful, sacred being in his life. The way he treated her afterward always made Willow feel incredibly cherished. “I’ve never known that loving someone could be so beautiful... so wonderful,” Willow whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. She felt Shep’s large, calloused hand smooth away the dampness across her shoulders.

“This can only happen when two hearts are involved,” Shep agreed thickly. Opening his eyes, he savored the sight of Willow lying across his body, her long, curved thighs bracketing his hips, her breasts pressed to his chest. A new emotional depth had been birthed between them. And Shep knew he fed her in every way. Good ways. Healing her as well as himself. He loved her. It would see them through their time in Ethiopia. Sliding his fingers through her hair, gently massaging her scalp, he heard her sigh, her arms sliding behind his neck, her lips softly kissing his cheek, temple and brow.

“I love you so much, and I’ve missed you so much...” she offered in a low voice, meeting his gaze, drowning in the love she saw as he held her.

His hands caressed her neck and shoulders. “You complete me, Willow,” he managed, still caught in the heat and pleasure of the moment. “We’ll use this time...

our time... for us, for healing each other.”

“I like where we’re going... together...”

END